

## the kind of world where we belong by Redonkgirl99

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**Summary:** By the time the calendar read November of 1983, Henry was well aware that his name had changed. On paper it was the same as the day he'd been born: Henry Joseph Sinclair. But, ask anyone around Hawkins about the handsome young man and they'd all call him by the same name: Henry "The Kid Who Fell Off the Quarry (and Lived!)" Sinclair. Steve Harrington/Original Male Character

## 1. should have known it wouldn't last

"Thanks for the ride home."

"Thanks for dinner."

For a moment it was quiet between the two teens. Neither really knew what to do in this situation; Henry had never had a girl over to his house before, and Barb had never gone over to a boy's house before. As the seconds ticked by in silence, the cool November air gently blew past them and softly stung their cheeks. Henry had the benefit of leaning in the doorway—halfway in and halfway out (something his father would've normally yelled at him to stop doing, unless *he* would like to pay to heat the whole damn neighborhood). But, Barb was fully at the mercy of the elements as she stood on the porch—growing colder as neither said anything.

"Do you—." Barb cleared her throat as her voice buckled ever so slightly, "Do you need a ride tomorrow?"

"Uh..." Henry mumbled, buying himself time as he considered, "I should be able to get that piece of junk working before then. Thanks for the offer though."

"Oh, okay," Barb said, sounding a tad surprised and maybe covering up a tiny bit of disappointment, "Um, then, see you at school?"

"See you at school," Henry replied, flashing one of his winning smiles.

Barb returned it with her own small, inauthentic one, but when she turned to leave, she suddenly stopped and spun back around to face him.

"Henry?" She said, Henry's smile disappearing as he heard how her voice took on a funny quality, "Thanks."

"For?" He asked, his brow furrowed.

"Distracting me," Barb replied, Henry's confusion quickly replaced with understanding, "Giving me something to do other than mope around my room all night. Thanks."

"Of course, Barb," Henry replied, his lighthearted demeanor nowhere to be seen as he spoke genuinely, "Anytime."

Barb's face softened into her true smile, and Henry responded in kind. It was gentle, familiar, and appeared romantic to anyone who caught it. The softness lasted for a moment more, but it didn't come to an end naturally. Instead, it was shattered by the familiar sound coming from behind Henry.

*Wouldn't it be nice if we were older  
Then we wouldn't have to wait so long?*

Again, understanding washed over Henry's expression as the terrible realization of what was happening hit him.

The sound of the Beach Boys flowed from deep inside of the house and out to where the two teens stood; Henry shutting his eyes and leaning his forehead against the frame.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, "Never had a girl over for dinner."

Barb laughed at that, and Henry cracked an eye open to look at her; his lips unwillingly pulling up at the corners. For a moment it was quiet as Barb continued to giggle, before Henry straightened up and levelled her with a gentle look.

"See you tomorrow, Barbara Holland," He said, no longer trying to hide his smile. Barb's grin softened to match Henry's expression, and she nodded slightly; looking as if she wanted to say something other than a farewell. But, she didn't, and neither one was too worried about what was unspoken. They'd get around to it eventually. They had time.

"See you tomorrow, Henry Sinclair."

By the time the calendar read November of 1983, Henry was well aware that his name had changed.

Sure, on paper it was the same name his parents had given him the day he'd been born: Henry Joseph Sinclair. Nothing special, just a name made up of his parent's surname and leftovers from dead relatives (his burden to bear as the eldest; Lucas and Erica had gotten

shiny new ones). But, that was just legally. Ask anyone around Hawkins—even the ones who didn't know him personally—about the handsome young man driving a 1976 Oldsmobile Cutlass and they'd all call him by the same name:

Henry "The Kid Who Fell Off the Quarry (and Lived!)" Sinclair.

It was better than its predecessor (although Henry "The Black Kid" Sinclair popped up sometimes to this day), but it still wasn't a great feeling to have everyone identify you by the worst time of your life.

Yes, at age 12 Henry had gone over the Quarry's edge and into the water, and obviously, he'd survived. It was complete and utter luck that kept him from dying when he fell 200 feet that day—godly intervention the religious folks around town would say. But, he hadn't gotten away unscathed, and as a result he'd been bedridden for a very long time. So long, that he hadn't been able to go back to school for the rest of the semester.

While his classmates graduated and moved right onto 8th grade, Henry had returned to school in the fall for a second take of the 7th. It wasn't the worst part of the whole ordeal, of course not, but at the time it had stung a little. The weak connections built between middle schoolers were easily broken by months of absence, and although he had been the focus of the entire town, Henry was alone.

And he never tried to change that.

Yeah, if you asked anyone in town about the handsome young man driving the 1976 Oldsmobile Cutlass, they could tell you all about how he fell in the Quarry at age 12—how he survived something that no one in the history of Hawkins ever had—but they couldn't tell you much else.

If you asked the students of Hawkins High about their classmate, they could tell you about his easy rapport with everyone around him. If you asked various teachers, they could tell you about his respectful nature and aptitude for problem solving. If you asked Lisa Wells, she could tell you about his bright smile, broad shoulders, and his sweet apologies when he turned down her invitation to the Sadie Hawkins dance.

If you asked Charles Sinclair, he could tell you about his son's work ethic, and his knack for cars that kept his piece of garbage running for far longer than it probably should have. If you asked Erica Sinclair, she could tell you about how her big brother would play with her more often than not, even when she personally thought he should be out with friends. If you asked Judith Sinclair, she could tell you about how her son was always willing to do chores without (much) complaint, and how he seemed to skip the teenage angst and go right to being a good and kind young man.

She was the only one who really noticed, and if you pressed she'd admit it:

She didn't know much about her son. She didn't know much about his thoughts, or hopes, or dreams. The last time he'd come to her about his feelings had been before the Quarry. Before Henry had built a wall between himself and those around him. Most people couldn't see it, but it was there, transparent. Something that blocked everyone from ever really getting close to him. Judith couldn't put her finger on what it was or what had caused it (the trauma of a near death experience, the pain being isolated, or something entirely different?), but at the end of the day, it didn't matter. It was there all the same. Nothing she, or anyone else, did seem to be able to change that. And as Henry grew older, she realized that maybe she'd just have to accept it.

She didn't know much about Henry.

And she was starting to worry that no one did.

If you asked Lucas Sinclair, he could explain to you everything about his brother.

But, he wouldn't.

Henry smiled to himself as the familiar sound of wheels on pavement and excited chatter reached his ears. He didn't raise his head from where it was buried under the hood of his car though, not even when one of the bikes rolled into the garage.

"Hey," Lucas said, throwing his bike down in Henry's peripheral.

"Hey," Henry replied, Lucas moving to stand beside the car; Henry wordlessly handing the flashlight over so his younger brother could shine it on the problem area.

"What's wrong with it now?" Lucas asked, Henry's lips turning upward slightly at his tone.

"Spark plugs," he said, pausing for a moment, "I hope. Go try to start it, will you?"

The brothers passed the flashlight yet again and Lucas ran over to the driver's seat to turn the keys that were already in the ignition. For a breathless moment, the sounds that car made were not promising, but all of a sudden it roared to life and both Sinclair boys cheered. Henry shut the hood while Lucas turned it off; both of them plopping down on the front of the car with satisfied smiles.

"How was your, uh, crusade?" Henry hazard a guess, Lucas rolling his eyes dramatically.

"Campaign. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

Henry laughed at that, leaning over to the mini-fridge and pulling out two Cokes; replying as he tossed one to his brother.

"I was pretty close that time."

"It was good," Lucas said, electing to ignore him, "Mike's the best at being the Dungeon Master. The Demogorgan did *technically* get Will, but Mike didn't see the roll so..."

"It's not cheating if nobody notices," Henry replied, easily getting a laugh out of Lucas. For a moment, it was quiet between the two Sinclair brothers. Both of them just enjoyed the cool fall night and the sharp taste of a sugary drink. But, reality returned sooner rather than later and Henry cleared his throat; Lucas recognizing one of his brother's tells immediately.

"So," Henry started slowly, Lucas at full attention now, "I had a friend over for dinner earlier, and Mom and Dad and Erica are all kind of being weird about it. It's not a big deal, just... thought I'd prepare you before you went inside."

"Why're they being weird?" Lucas asked with a furrowed brow, his confused look incredibly similar to the one his older brother had worn earlier. Henry studied the top of his can before taking a sip, and the moment that passed was just a little bit too long.

"It was a girl."

Henry kept his eyes on his drink, once again seeing his brother movements in his peripheral vision. Lucas was still for a few seconds with his eyes trained on Henry, and then he turned to look straight ahead; waiting a moment—maybe gathering his thoughts—before he spoke.

"I didn't know you had any friends that're girls."

"It's new," Henry replied promptly, neither brother looking at each other, "Barb. She's nice."

Henry felt Lucas turn to look at him, and he resisted for a moment before giving in and meeting his eyes.

"How nice?" Lucas asked, Henry eyeing the door that stood between the garage and the house.

"Very nice. She, uh." Henry shot another glance at the door before returning to looking Lucas dead on, this time with a million unspoken words in his eyes, "She really gets me."

Surprise took over Lucas's features at that and it was quiet as he processed. But, he finally smiled slightly and any tension in Henry started to dissipate.

"That's... good," Lucas said, Henry nodding before looking forward again, "What do you mean 'weird?'"

"They played *Wouldn't It Be Nice* when she was leaving."

Only silence followed that. Both looked out, past everything that was safely inside the brightly lit garage, and towards the darkness just outside the door. It was a quiet night in this part of town, with the only sound being the rustling of the trees as gentle winds blew through them. Hawkins was having a mild November so far, nothing

any of them would ever complain about, but there was something odd about being able to go without getting bundled up.

Henry tapped absentmindedly on the top of the can with his nail as he thought back to sitting at the dinner table. It hadn't been as bad as he'd imagined it. Of course, back when he'd entertained the possibility of bringing home a girl to meet his parents, it hadn't been Barb. He liked Barb and his parents had too. Things were easier with Barb than they would be with any other girl.

But, even so, Henry felt that familiar pit form in his stomach. It was stupid; Barb was just his friend who came over for dinner. It wasn't like it was anything other than that. It wasn't like it was anything his parents were imagining it to be. This wasn't some build up, it was just him having his friend over. It was just him and Barb being friends, not the precursor to—.

Henry's fingers twitched towards his pocket, even though they were empty, and he mentally cursed at himself. This was not something to get so worked up about that he needed one. God, this was stupid. He shouldn't be feeling like this, shouldn't be reaching for a box, he shouldn't have all of those fears popping up again. Stupid. Stupid. St —.

Henry stiffened as he was pulled out of his thoughts by the muffled sound coming from beside him. He looked over at Lucas, and one look at his baby brother's face was all it took for his mind to be completely taken off of his anxieties. With an unwilling smile pulling on his lips, he spoke.

"Shut up."

Lucas just laughed harder.

The morning after Barb had eaten dinner with his family, Henry cruised down the road in his newly repaired car. It was bright, seventy-five degrees, and there was a small part of his brain telling him to skip school. But, he was the type that ignored those whispers, and instead he dutifully headed towards Hawkins High.

With the windows down, and the radio playing *Little Red Corvette*, it



made for a picturesque morning. Henry gently drummed his fingers against the wheels as his lips formed the words that Prince was crooning on the radio. He was lighter this morning than he had been the night before. It wasn't that it was all resolved, of course, it was just a lot harder to be burdened by anxiety when the air was crisp and the sun was gently warming your skin.

Henry's idyllic morning was soon interrupted, however, by a sudden cacophony of sound. He straightened up in his seat and turned down his music as he tried to get a handle on what he was hearing. The sound that was coming from behind him.

*"Wouldn't it be nice if we were older, then we wouldn't have to wait so long?"*

Once his brain finally processed what was happening, Henry threw a middle finger out of the car and unsuccessfully tried to squash the smile taking over his features. He could hear how loud laughter mixed in with the off-tune screeching of the Beach Boys, and he allowed that grin to fully take over his features when the familiar kids, hauling on their bikes, went on either side of his car.

"You're all dead to me!" He called out his window, grinning as Dustin and Mike both blew up into hysterical giggles—not even trying to keep up their singing anymore—and Lucas shot him a finger gun as he continued to serenade his brother.

As they neared a stop sign, Henry slowed and he threw a wave at the kids who only seemed to speed up. He chuckled as he watched them cycle into the distance and he leaned back against his seat. Once he started forward again, he still drove at a more ambling pace. He was in no rush to get to school, and he figured he might as well enjoy the last bits of sunshine this year had to offer. Those boys hadn't ruined his idyllic morning. He probably wouldn't admit it, but being heckled by middle schoolers had made it all the more perfect. Henry's smile stayed on his face for the rest of the drive to school.

Looking back on it, back on the 7th of November, 1983, Henry would wonder why he hadn't noticed that only three bikes had flanked his car that sunny morning.

## 2. biggest loser alive

"They made out in the bathroom."

Henry jumped slightly, and jerked his head towards the unexpected voice. He'd nearly made it the entire school day without anybody trying to talk to him about anything more than whether or not they'd had homework or something equally as innocuous. He was almost disappointed. But, he relaxed as he realized who had started keeping pace with him, and even smiled slightly as he turned his eyes forward again.

"Hey, Barb."

Barb smiled a little at that, despite the *gravity* of what she'd just said. Henry liked to think that was his own personal impact.

"Hi, Henry," Barb said, "He left a note in her locker and they made out in the bathroom."

"Uh..." Henry came to a stop in front of his own locker as he thought it over, before he replied honestly, "Gross."

"Right?!" Barb exclaimed, leaning back against the locker next to Henry's, "That's *so unsanitary*. Also, anyone could walk in on them!"

"I mean, I would hope they locked the door," Henry replied, never slowing his movements as he shoved his books into his backpack, "Did Mundy give us homework? I kind of spaced out at the end there."

"No, he didn't. He probably heard that we were having a test with Kaminsky and decided to give us a break," Barb said, slightly rushed as she pushed past the unimportant topic, "But, who *does* that? Skips class to go swap spit with some guy in a *public bathroom*. You know what, I'll tell you who, someone like Carol or Tommy H, *not* Nancy Wh—."

Henry shut his locker and turned to look Barb dead in the eyes; cutting her off without a single word. There was a moment of silence,

and Barb deflated.

"Yeah," she said, her voice low and her eyes on her feet, "I know. You're right."

Henry sighed as he took in Barb's downtrodden body language, and he felt a tug of guilt at his stomach even though he knew it wasn't his fault. Finally, he put his hands on her shoulders, forcing her to look up at him and make eye contact.

"You want to come over sometime this weekend?" He offered after a moment, an unwilling smile starting to pull on Barb's lips, "I think I could make some space in my very busy schedule of doing nothing. Plus, I'm not sure if you could tell, but my parents were pretty happy last night that I finally had a girl over to my house."

"You know... I think I noticed that, yeah," Barb replied, truly smiling now.

"Really, you could?" Henry asked sarcastically, turning so he had a hand on Barb's back and could steer them towards the exit, "What gave it away? Was it the excited looks my mom and dad kept exchanging about every 30 seconds? Or my sister's utter *disbelief* when you sat down at the table? Or-or maybe was it the Beach Boys? Was it the Beach Boys, Barb?"

The giggles that she'd had at the beginning turned into open laughter as Henry's rant drew to a close. He knew he was hamming it up more than he usually would, and that they were attracting more attention than they normally preferred (across the hallway, Ally's eyes flicked between the two of them and her brows raised), but he didn't care. Barb wasn't sad anymore.

"Hey, Barb! Oh."

Henry and Barb turned to see Nancy Wheeler herself come to a sudden halt. Clearly she had seen Barb from down the hall, but hadn't processed exactly what she was doing until she'd tried to get her friend's attention. Nancy smiled sheepishly as she crossed the distance between them, before coming to a stop in front of them; fiddling with her sleeves awkwardly.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," she said, "I just wanted to talk to Barb about something, but if you two are busy, I can just—."

"It's fine," Barb said with a shrug, one beat of awkward silence before Henry couldn't handle it and he spoke.

"We were just joking around."

"Right," Nancy said, a tad softer than before with a funny look in her eye, "I know you, don't I?"

"This is Henry," Barb quickly replied, almost as if that was a defense to whatever Nancy was thinking, "Henry Sinclair."

"Oh, right," Nancy said, Henry seeing the *exact* moment it clicked in her brain who he was and bracing himself for *that* particular small talk, "Your brother, Lucas, he's friends with my brother."

"Yeah," Henry said, unable to keep the lilt of surprise out of his voice, "He hangs out in your basement a lot."

"It's not just that, though. Didn't you come over to my house?" Nancy said, realization dawning on Henry's features.

"Yeah, once, when we were like ten. It was your brother's birthday party; my mom dragged me along because she had to take Lucas."

"We played Sorry inside because we didn't want to run around with the 'little kids,'" Nancy said, laughing as the memories came flooding back to her.

"Wait..." Henry putting his head on his forehead and shutting his eyes as he tried to sort through fuzzy (given their close proximity to the more traumatic ones) childhood memories, "Tell me if I'm misremembering, but wasn't Jonathan Byers there too? He played with us."

"He was!" Nancy replied, just as surprised, "I think he won!"

"That's so weird," Henry said, maybe a little more thoughtfully than someone normally would in these circumstances, but he wasn't alone.

"I remember having a lot of fun," Nancy murmured, her words tilting almost as if it was a question. One that Henry heard loud and clear, but already knew the answer to.

"Oh, didn't you want to say something to Barb?" Henry asked, feeling a little bad that he'd left her out of the conversation for so long; he was supposed to be her line of defense against any bad feelings her best friend might cause, and here he was, chatting with Nancy like there was nothing wrong. Luckily, his words snapped Nancy out of her thoughts, and she smiled.

"Yeah."

"Alright, I'll leave you to it." Henry turned his attention back to Barb, where it *should* be, "Come by whenever you want."

"Right, see you later," Barb said, ever so slightly nervous as she shot a glance towards Nancy. Henry was already walking away when he waved, feeling a little bit guilty that he was leaving Barb to deal with Nancy's questions on her own, but also a little relieved.

As he pushed the doors to the school open and headed out to the parking lot, his mind was a million miles away. Yeah, he understood the question Nancy had been asking herself, it had occurred to him in the moment too: if they'd had so much fun that day, why hadn't they stayed friends? But, it hadn't taken more than a millisecond of thought for him to figure out the answer to that one.

Nancy Wheeler was a good girl *extraordinaire*. She was smart, modest, came from a good family, never went to parties, and every other thing that came from that role. The closest she'd done to toeing out of line was dating a particular player of both basketball and women. But, although he'd never tell Barb, Henry didn't doubt Nancy's ability to make him settle down in the suburbs with her for the rest of their lives.

Jonathan Byers, on the other hand, couldn't be more different. People called him a freak, and treated him like one too. Which was pretty awful, but there was no denying he was different from the rest. He had no friends, but unlike Henry, he just withdrew. And, while most people would chalk that up to his "freakish" nature, Henry had heard

more than enough from his mother about the Byers' home situation to know that the pressure to keep their family from falling completely apart was heavily on Jonathan's shoulders.

Then there was Henry.

Henry was Henry, and that was enough to set him apart from the other two.

While for a brief moment their paths had intersected in the Wheeler's living room (*before* Nancy fell into line, *before* Jonathan became a complete social pariah, and *before... before*), there was no denying the people that they had each become. Very different people.

And, for the life of him, Henry couldn't comprehend a situation that would bring them together the way an older kids' alliance against younger ones had. At least, not one that would ever happen.

"Henry?!"

For the second time today, Henry jumped, only to turn and see a teenage girl trying to catch his attention.

"Oh, hey Lisa," he said, his awkwardness dissipating as she neared and he caught sight of her concerned expression, "What's up?"

"Um," Lisa Wells started, like she usually did when she had to say something to Henry. If anyone asked, she was 100% over him, but sometimes she still felt the flutters of attraction and the sting of rejection when she looked at him, "So, my brother, he goes to middle school. And, um, he saw your brother get called into the principal's office."

Henry tipped his head slightly as he thought about it. That was out of character for Lucas, he was a good kid. But, at the same time, Henry didn't doubt his brother and his friends' ability to get into some *shenanigans*. Probably nothing.

"And, um..." Lisa continued, pulling Henry's attention back to her, "He said that he saw the Chief in there too."

Henry's fingers twitched towards his pocket and he cursed under his

breath; he'd thought it would be better if he left his backpack in his car, but now all he wanted was a loose one that he'd thrown in there for emergencies.

As another group of children hurried past him, Henry figured it was actually probably a good thing.

He settled on biting his nails.

For what seemed the millionth time in the eight minutes he'd been waiting, Henry threw a glance across the hallway at the frosted glass that read *Principal Russel Coleman* in dark lettering. He knew that on the other side of that door were his brother and the Chief of Police, he just didn't know *why*. And that was way scarier than he'd like to admit.

Finally, *finally*, after what felt like years of waiting, the door swung open and out filed the familiar preteen boys. Although it was a little selfish, Henry couldn't help but feel relieved when he realized that Mike and Dustin had *also* been in there.

Henry straightened up as they were ushered out of the room by Coleman and a cop, with the familiar large man rounding out the back of the group. Henry made eye contact with him for a split-second before he dropped his gaze to the ground; familiar discomfort coursing through his body. Henry could see in his peripheral how his mouth opened—undoubtedly to say something about his presence that would probably be a little too blunt for comfort—before someone beat him to the punch.

"Henry?"

Lucas was confused, all of the kids were, and rightfully so. Henry didn't make a habit of showing up in the hallways of Hawkins Middle. In his opinion, he'd had more than his fair share of time here, and he shouldn't have to spend any more in this dreary building. So, clearly these were outstanding circumstances.

"Hey, Bud," Henry said as he forced a smile, trying to keep his spirits up, at least for appearances.

"What are you doing here?" Lucas asked, crossing the distance between them.

"Heard that the Chief was talking to you, thought I'd come check," he said casually, before his voice lowered for only Lucas to hear and any carelessness disappeared, "Everything alright?"

Lucas nodded, and Henry felt some of his nerves dissipate, but when he opened his mouth to give a real answer, he was cut off by a familiar gruff voice that all but commanded his attention.

"Joyce Byers came into the station this morning," Chief Jim Hopper said, Henry meeting his eyes even though that was one of the last things he wanted to do, "She can't find her son."

The ride home from school that day was markedly different than the drive to.

For starters, there were four people in the car rather than just one, because when the Chief of Police asks you to ferry three preteens home so they wouldn't have a chance to start playing detective, you did it. Now, instead of that idyllic quiet only disturbed by the soft sound of the radio, the Oldsmobile was filled with endless chatter. But, more notable that the noise was the fact that Henry had not been blessed with the lightheartedness from earlier, and instead wordlessly frowned as he drove through Hawkins.

"Maybe he was kidnapped by some Russian spies and—." Dustin's theory was clearly far from over when he was cut off.

"Why would Russian spies want to kidnap Will?" Lucas demanded, leaning over Mike so Dustin could see the full majesty of his incredulous expression.

"I'm getting there, let me finish!" Dustin replied, muttering something profane under his breath before continuing, "Maybe Russian spies kidnapped Will, and are interrogating him for information on the United States *right now*."

"What could Will know that the Russians don't?" Mike asked, abandoning his mediator role to join the side of disbelief, "He's just a



kid!"

"Or maybe brainwashing him into becoming an informant for the Russians!" Dustin countered, "No one would ever expect an American kid to be a spy!"

"Yeah, because a kid can't find out important stuff!" Lucas replied, "Do you think the Russians are trying to figure out who Stacey Campbell has a crush on?"

"Will's small! He could fit into some tight spaces!"

"What tight spaces?! The vents at school?! So the Russians can find where Phyllis stores the chocolate pudding?!"

"Henry, what do you think happened to Will?!" Mike all but yelled, clearly trying to get this conversation back on track. It sort of worked, the car fell silent as all three of the boys stopped talking; curious what an older and more experienced (in comparison) person would have to say. But, as the seconds ticked on, it became obvious that Henry wouldn't be answering any time soon.

"Henry?" Lucas asked, tapping on his older brother's shoulder. Henry turned his head towards the boys in the back, and they realized he hadn't been ignoring him, he just hadn't heard the question, "What do you think happened to Will?"

"Oh." The sound Henry made seemed involuntary, but the tone was enough for the boys to realize that what he thought was not nearly as exciting or fun as Russian spies, "Well, um, I hope he just got lost or ran off."

"Will wouldn't run away," Mike replied, serious now. Henry sighed and nodded.

"Yeah, I know."

The car was quiet again, but only for a moment before Lucas put his arms against the back of the front seats and rested his chin on top.

"Are you okay?" He asked, frowning not unlike how Henry had been moments earlier.

"Yeah," Henry said, glancing at his brother before plastering on a smile and giving a much more convincing answer, "Yeah, of course. Cops just make me nervous, you know that."

"Even the Chief?" Dustin interjected, just as terrible at reading the room as ever, "Wasn't he the one who—?"

*SMACK.*

Dustin yelped at the slap Lucas landed on his head and—less obviously, but still worth noting—the elbow Mike shoved into his stomach.

*"What the Hell?!"* Dustin exclaimed, glaring at his two best friends.

"Alright, Henderson residence," Henry said, cutting off the fight before it really got started. Dustin muttered something under his breath as stumbled out of the car; huffily fixing his clothes.

"You guys suck!" He yelled, slamming the door shut and stomping towards his house. The two boys in the back were unresponsive to their friend's antics, but Henry smiled slightly as he rolled down the window and stuck his head out.

"Dustin!" He said, getting the kid's attention, "Your bike!"

Dustin almost seemed to twitch before stomping back over to the car and opening the trunk to get his bike from the heap. After a moment of struggling, he got it free and he slammed the trunk before stomping up the driveway again.

"Dustin!"

The grumpy kid turned towards him expectantly, but this time Henry said nothing, and just blew him a kiss. The two boys in the backseat erupted into laughter as Dustin rolled his eyes and disappeared into his garage. When Henry pulled out of the driveway and headed towards their next stop, Mike and Lucas were still giggling.

By the time Mike had been dropped off, the conversation had steered away from Henry and back on the proper track: Will's disappearance. The two boys had thrown around more than a few ridiculous theories

about what could've happened to Will, and neither of them seemed to put much weight into them, even when it was coming out of their own mouths. Even so, after Mike climbed out of the car and retrieved his bike, he'd called back at Lucas.

"We'll talk more about this later!"

Lucas said something back confirming it as Mike started to walk up to his house; Henry driving away as soon as it was clear he would get inside okay.

The space Lucas's friends had occupied with their bodies and voices was empty now, and the car fell silent for a moment. Henry looked out the window with his mind more on the past half hour and less on the road. He hadn't been lying, cops did make him nervous, but a certain cop had a way of making him shut down faster than any other. Hell, even just thinking about it—thinking about what Dustin had almost blurted out—had his jaw clenching and his hands tightening around the steering wheel. His eyes flashed towards his backpack on the passenger seat as the urge hit him.

"What *do* you think happened to Will?"

If Lucas's words hadn't been enough to wake Henry out of his reverie, him clambering into the front seat certainly did.

"We're two minutes from the house," Henry protested, aiming a swat at his brother as Lucas kicked his backpack onto the floor and plopped into the front seat.

"Seriously, man," Lucas said, leveling Henry with that look that meant he wouldn't be able to dance his way around this anymore. Henry hated that he could do that, but it was better that Lucas had this power rather than anyone else.

Finally, after a moment, he sighed and sent his little brother a sideways look.

"Will's... *small*. And-and sensitive, and delicate, and I *know* what the kids at your school say about him. Hell, I remember what his *dad* said about him. It's not a secret. Fucking Lonnie Byers told anyone who

would listen that he thought his son was..." Henry took a deep breath, and he threw a look out the window—maybe to collect his thoughts, maybe to hide his expression—before he continued, "It just makes me nervous."

The car was silent as Henry's words sank in. He hadn't wanted to admit it out loud, but it was the truth, and although his stomach twisted in anxiety for the missing kid, it was nice to not be the only one weighed down with those thoughts.

"You think someone did something to him?" Lucas asked, his voice much smaller than before, and Henry felt a stab of guilt for making his poor brother have to think about this too.

"I just think it's a possibility," Henry said, switching gears into reassuring, "Way more likely that he got lost in the woods or something. But, I am worried that maybe I'm the only one thinking that. That the police haven't considered it."

"You could go tell them," Lucas said, Henry sending him a look, "I bet they'd listen to you, or maybe if you went and talked to the Chief—."

"Oh, look. We're home."

Henry's deadpanned voice cut off Lucas's suggestion, and before he could continue, Henry had grabbed his backpack and gotten out of the car; effectively ending any conversation.

By the time the clock read 7:30, Henry was knee-deep in studying. Kaminsky tests were a bitch, and even if he thought he had a handle on the material, he was making absolutely sure that he wouldn't get tripped up by his own confidence.

His mind was full of nothing but science text and random facts that he knew he would forget the moment the semester ended when there was a knock on the door, pulling him out of his thoughts.

"Come in!" He called, leaning back in his chair to get a good look at who was entering his room, "Hey, Mom."

"Hi," Judith Sinclair replied with a small smile, "Is this what you're going to be doing for the night?"

Henry looked down at the mass of notes, flashcards, and textbooks on his desk before looking back up at his mom.

"I mean, yeah?" He said, frowning "Do you think I should be doing something else?"

Mrs. Sinclair laughed and shook her head.

"No, no, I was just wondering if you could keep an eye on your siblings while your father and I are out," she said, crossing the room so she could place a hand on Henry's shoulder.

"Yeah, no problem," he replied with a smile, "Where are you going?"

It was subtle, but Henry knew his mother well enough to see it; how her expression turned down slightly.

"We volunteered to help with the search party," she said softly, "It felt like the least we could do."

Henry nodded in understanding before he reached up and gently put his hand on top of his mom's. He knew what she was thinking about; how *close* it was to their family. It was quiet for a moment between them before Mrs. Sinclair straightened up and gave her son a squeeze on the shoulder.

"We won't be back until late, around eleven, so make sure they get to bed on time," she said as she walked towards the door, Henry humming an affirmative, "Oh, and keep an eye on Lucas... I'm worried about him."

"I've got it, Mom," Henry replied, as sure as ever, and Mrs. Sinclair smiled in thanks. She didn't know why she worried—she could always count on her son.

It was about two hours later when Henry shut his textbook and stretched. He'd been bent over his desk since his parents had left—with only brief bathroom and snack breaks—and his body did not appreciate it. Finally, he stood up, hearing his joints pop, and he headed out of his room and to the stairs; stopping halfway and leaning to see his sister sat a little too close to the TV.

"Okay, Erica, bedtime!" He called.

"Awwww!"

"Nope, I already let you stay up later than usual," Henry said seriously, although he *did* crack a smile at his younger sister's overdramatic whining, "C'mon."

Erica muttered under her breath, but she turned off the TV and walked over to the stairs; sticking her tongue out at Henry as she passed him. All it really did was make him smile wider, though.

"Where's Lucas?" Henry asked as he followed her up the stairs, Erica rolling her eyes.

"Probably in his room, talking to his nerd friends on his nerd phone."

"Hey," Henry said, a gentle warning to his tone, "Brush your teeth and get to bed."

"Fine," Erica said loftily before disappearing into the bathroom. Henry snorted, used to her attitude, before he rounded on his brother's shut door. Earlier, the three boys had been talking about Will's disappearance flippantly, but Henry wondered if Lucas's feelings had changed now that it was dark and Will was *still* missing. Or, he thought, maybe Lucas's feelings had changed because of what he'd said in the car earlier today. If it was *his* fault for putting dark thoughts about Will's whereabouts in Lucas's head. Finally, Henry decided to just bite the bullet.

"Hey, Bud, you still up?" He asked, softly knocking on the door. Henry considered just walking away when there was no response, but his worry won out and he opened the door.

Instead of finding his brother asleep, or even that he wasn't in his room, Henry found Lucas looking *supremely* caught out.

From the shoes, to the coat, to the backpack, it wasn't hard for Henry to piece together what he was planning on doing. And clearly Lucas knew it.

It was quiet for a moment as Henry processed what he was seeing

and Lucas scrambled for an excuse that he knew his big brother wouldn't buy. But, before an embarrassing lie could slip past his lips, Henry spoke with a low voice.

"Your friends meeting you?"

"... Yeah," Lucas said, instead of spitting out something half-baked. Henry nodded slightly in response and again, it was quiet. This time though, it was broken by a soft sigh.

"Mom and Dad are going to be back around eleven, and you know they'll come check on you," Henry said matter-of-factly, "So... you better be back by then."

Disbelief took over Lucas's expression, but that was the only part of him that changed. He didn't even look towards the door, as if he thought he'd misheard and that Henry hadn't *actually* just given him the okay.

"Don't give me a chance to change my mind," Henry finally said, laughing slightly. Only then did Lucas move; his lips pulling into a grin as he grabbed his bag and headed towards the stairs, "Hey."

Henry's voice froze him in his tracks, and Lucas slowly turned, almost as if he thought he'd taken too long and Henry really had second thoughts. But, instead of ordering him to put his pajamas on and go to bed, Henry just smiled ruefully.

"Be careful."

"Promise," Lucas replied, the two brothers smiling at each other for a moment more before he turned and left.

The front door opened and closed and the house grew quiet, Henry sighing before he headed back to his room. He knew he wouldn't be getting to sleep anytime soon.

Henry had been right: he hadn't even thought of getting to bed. At the moment, he was trying to study more for the test he had in less than twelve hours, but the words on the page ran together into a garble he couldn't even begin to comprehend. He shouldn't be studying, shouldn't even be trying—his mind was too preoccupied

with all the terrible things that could be happening to his brother and his friends at this very moment.

A part of him wondered why the *hell* he'd let Lucas go. If a volunteer search group of adults couldn't do it, no way in hell three preteens stood a chance. At best, all the boys would find were mild cases of hypothermia going off of the weather, at worst... Well, maybe they'd find exactly what happened to Will.

He'd been counting on safety in numbers when he'd let Lucas go—thinking that his friends would have his back. And sure, they would, but did it really matter when they were children? They really couldn't do much if things went south, and instead of telling all of them to go home and forget about it, Henry had signed off on it. Practically shoved Lucas out the door.

How dumb was he? Did he want his brother and his friends to get hurt? He'd driven them home after school because the Chief had all but ordered him to, what was the response going to be when Hopper found out that he'd given them the go ahead to do exactly what he'd told them *not* to? Why'd he do that?!

The pencil that Henry had been nervously twisting in his fingers stilled, and without prompting, his eyes drifted down to the bottom shelf of his desk. For a moment, he just looked at it, not wanting to give in, before he sighed and reached over to reveal the jumbled contents. Over the years, he'd used this drawer as a catch-all, so much that he wasn't entirely certain what was in here anymore.

Except for one thing.

The one thing he knew for certain, because he remembered putting it in there and shutting the drawer with finality. Like, if he didn't look at it, he wouldn't ever have to think about that time of his life again.

The moment his fingers brushed against the rough construction paper, he knew he'd found it. As he slid it out from under everything else in the drawer, he couldn't help but look away; putting off the inevitable just a little bit longer. But, he finally had it in front of him, and there was no escaping it any longer.



## ***HENRY SINCLAIR: THE INDESTRUCTIBLE TEEN!***

Henry let out a shaky chuckle, more due to relief than humor, and he smiled as something bittersweet bloomed in his chest. It was just as he remembered it; the juvenile block lettering at the top, the wobbly—but still impressive—illustration of himself standing tall with a superhero's cape flowing from his shoulders, and the small message in the bottom right corner.

*"i hope you get better fast! 3 will byers"*

The sound of the backdoor opening jerked Henry out of his memory, and he quickly shoved the card back in the drawer before hopping down the stairs. Although he played it cool, Henry breathed a sigh of relief as he finally laid eyes on Lucas, seemingly unscathed.

"You good?"

Lucas screeched and nearly fell flat on his ass, if it weren't for his arms flinging out and catching Henry's. His older brother set him upright and chuckled with a hint of concern in his eyes.

"Someone's on edge," he observed.

"Yeah," Lucas said before forcing out laughter that left Henry more suspicious than anything else.

"Something wrong?" Henry asked, Lucas swallowing hard.

"Nope."

For a moment it was quiet as the two brothers engaged in what could only be described as a stare-off, before Lucas painted a ridiculous smile on his features and Henry withdrew.

"Okay..." Henry mumbled before speaking up, "Well, go get ready for bed, then. I don't want Mom and Dad to know that I even let you stay up this late."

Lucas nodded before hurrying upstairs while Henry watched him with a furrowed brow. He followed soon after, at a much more leisurely pace, and was just in time to see Lucas as he crossed the

hallway—now in his pajamas—and slammed the bathroom door behind him. Henry frowned at the door for a moment, but said nothing, and instead continued on his path to his own room; idly scooping up his notes up off his desk and shoving them into his backpack as he listened to the sink running.

Too soon after Lucas had entered the bathroom (Henry really should get on him to brush his teeth longer), he was walking back to his room. For a moment, Henry lingered in his own room—not wanting to make it seem like he was waiting to pounce on him—before he headed over next door, catching Lucas just as he slid under the covers.

"All of your homework is done, right?" Henry asked, knowing he should've made sure of that *before* he let Lucas go traipsing through the woods on a school night. But, Lucas nodded, and it was quiet between the two brothers for a moment, before Henry cleared his throat, "Okay. Goodnight."

"We didn't find him."

Henry was halfway out the door when that quiet voice called his attention back. Lucas was still in bed, but only now did he notice how tightly he was enveloped in his blankets, and how he seemed smaller than Henry could remember him looking in quite a while.

"Yeah, I didn't think so, Bud," he finally replied gently, his movements slow as he crossed the room to sit down on the side of Lucas's bed. Now that there wasn't a room's length distance between them, Henry could clearly see the expression on his younger brother's face; could clearly see that he was feeling lost, more lost than Henry thought a kid should be.

"Hey," he said, grabbing Lucas's attention, "You know, no matter what happens, it's going to be okay."

"But, Will—" Lucas started, sitting up on his elbows.

"I didn't say it was going to be easy, or that it wasn't going to *suck*, but..." Henry interrupted, before trailing off and adopting a wry smile, "Take it from Hawkins's patron saint of misery: it'll be okay."

You've got Dustin and Mike. They're going through the exact same stuff as you, that makes it easier, trust me."

"Is that why you let me go?" Lucas asked, Henry dropping his head and smiling; he hadn't been the only one wondering why the hell he'd given the okay, "Because I was with my friends?"

"Yeah, that was part of it," he confirmed, "And... I'd do the same thing if I were you."

Lucas nodded, but his expression didn't change. He looked just as lost as before, and Henry frowned. Time to get serious.

"Will is really lucky to have friends like you guys, you know that right?" He said, piquing Lucas's attention with that one, "I mean, most people don't have one friend who'd do what you did tonight, let alone three."

"But, we didn't find him," Lucas pointed out.

"Yeah, I know, but you *tried*. And I know you'll *keep* trying, and that you won't stop until you do."

"But, what if we waste too much time focused on—focused on other things and we don't find him before...?" The rest of Lucas's sentence went unsaid, but Henry heard it, loud and clear. He put his hands on Lucas's shoulders and looked him dead in the eye.

"Then you'll have to go through that, but it won't be your fault. None of this will ever be on you."

Lucas broke eye contact and Henry knew that he didn't accept what he'd said. His expression was just as conflicted and lost as ever, only this time Henry noticed something he hadn't before. Something that took him a few moments to place.

### *Guilt.*

And in that moment, Henry couldn't help but wonder if maybe the reason his words weren't helping was because he didn't have the full story.

"You know... If there's something you're not telling me—."

"What? No, no. I mean, why-why wouldn't I tell you?" Lucas tripped over himself as he spoke, and Henry's frown deepened at how *adamant* he was.

"Okay, well, if there was. *If*. If," Henry said when Lucas opened his mouth to interrupt, probably to insist that there wasn't anything, "You know you can trust me, right?"

"Yeah, of course," he replied flippantly, Henry sending him a look that made him pay attention.

"Seriously, Lucas. If there's anything, if there's *ever* anything, you can tell me. Alright? I've got your back, and there's *nothing* that could ever change that."

Lucas was quiet; he'd dropped his eyes to his comforter the moment he'd seen the intense emotion in Henry's eyes, and he hadn't raised them since. Instead, he pulled on a stray thread as Henry's words hung in the air. Finally, he spoke, slow and labored.

"Would... Would you still have my back if...? If I said you're the biggest loser alive?"

Lucas looked up with that familiar spark in his eyes and Henry felt his own smile return. Sure, it was an obvious subject change, but Henry couldn't bring himself to care. He knew that he'd gotten through to him.

Maybe Lucas was hiding something, and maybe that something was why he had been jumpy and had looked so lost and guilty. Or, maybe not. Maybe this was all just something Henry's anxiety and paranoia had cooked up. Maybe the only thing that was weighing on Lucas was his missing friend. Either way, Lucas knew that he was in his corner, no matter what, and that was enough for Henry.

"I mean, it's pushing it," Henry said, grinning, "It's definitely pushing it."

This time, when there was a lull in the conversation, it was because of laughter rather than silence.

### 3. omission and boldfaced

Henry was late.

Okay, he wasn't *late* late. Just, later then he liked to be on a test day. He liked to take his time getting to class, go over his notes again at his desk, and overall not feel rushed. But, here he was, all but running towards Hawkins' High. A part of him wanted to blame Lucas for keeping him up until all hours worrying, but he knew better. There was no one to blame for this but himself.

Henry glanced down at his watch and huffed at the time as he reached out to pull the door open.

*"Shit."*

He looked up in time to watch how wrenching the door open suddenly had caused someone on the other side to drop a stack of paper. Regret instantly filled his stomach and he inwardly cursed himself for not paying attention to his surroundings. He'd inconvenienced someone else and, well, he was probably going to be even later to class now.

"Oh, man, I'm sorry," Henry said, dropping to his knees to help gather them up. What had started as an apologetic gesture stopped suddenly when he picked up one of the pieces of paper and finally saw what was on it; an unreadable expression on his face as he looked down at the picture at the center of the page.

Will Byers stared back.

Henry only paused for a moment before he pushed aside his thoughts and continued to pick up the papers—which he now knew were missing posters—before he held them out towards the teenager he hadn't realized was Jonathan Byers until just now.

The pair of teenage boys climbed up off the ground, and Jonathan reordered the pages into a neat pile as an uncomfortable silence hung over them.

"Sorry again," Henry said, his voice now a little too genuine for someone who'd just accidentally knocked some stuff out of someone's hands. Henry caught himself looking away and forced himself to make eye contact, no matter how painful it was, but he found that it didn't matter; Jonathan was looking down at the papers in his hands with an unnecessary amount of focus.

"It's fine," Jonathan muttered, not sounding terribly sincere, "I was just..."

He turned towards the exit, but Henry made no move to head towards his classroom, and instead watched him as he went. What had felt so pressing moments ago didn't seem so important anymore.

"Hey, Jonathan?" Henry called before he walked out the door to go god knows where, "I'm really sorry about your brother."

"Thanks," Jonathan replied, again not making eye contact *or* sounding like he meant it. Henry didn't take this one personally either. He got it. He also got why Jonathan was edging towards the door. But, he didn't let him go, not just yet.

"A few months ago, I took him and Lucas and the other boys to see *Return of the Jedi*," Henry said, and for the first time Jonathan didn't look like he wanted to be anywhere but this conversation, "He cried at the end, even though he'd seen the movie like three times already."

Henry laughed slightly, not even paying attention to Jonathan anymore. He was too wrapped up in the memory that seemed so distant already.

It had only been a few tears, and Will had pretended so obstinately that he wasn't, but he definitely had been crying. Henry didn't blame him; it was the end of the story, and the definition of bittersweet. Even if the good guys had won, there had been losses, and... They didn't talk about it, but Henry had understood why watching someone who had been so bad do something good because of his love for his son might have made Will emotional. They also didn't talk about how Henry had made Lucas sit in the backseat with Dustin and Mike, and let Will control the radio during the drive home. It had been such a small thing, but Will had smiled so brightly that Henry

couldn't help but return it. God, had that really only been six months ago? Because right now, it couldn't feel farther away.

"He cried when I took him to see it the first time too," Jonathan said softly, pulling Henry out of his thoughts and forcing him to acknowledge that they were making eye contact for the first time. He smiled and, even though it was nearly unbearably sad to see, Henry had to admit—emotion looked better on Jonathan Byers than the forced apathy he'd worn moments ago.

"He's a good kid," Henry said, with his own rueful smile, "And if there's anything you or-or your mom need, let me know. Even if it's mowing the lawn or something."

"Thanks," Jonathan said, *finally* genuine.

"Anytime," Henry replied, and when Jonathan headed out the door, he didn't stop him.

The bell rang, and Henry swore.

"I have *never* seen Henry Sinclair show up late to class, *especially* on a test day."

Henry smiled and shook his head slightly before he sent a sideways glance at the woman who sidled up to him with an exaggerated disapproving look.

"He didn't even give me a tardy," Henry replied, chuckling slightly when Barb *tsked*.

"I can't help but wonder if this is only the start to your downslide?" She said as the pair made their way out of the bottlenecked door and down the hall, "What's next? Not turning in homework? Falling asleep at your desk?"

"I've done that last one," Henry replied, "In *that* class."

The pair's banter was cut short by the sound of someone clearing their throat behind them, and they both turned to see who was trying to get their attention. Nancy wore that same uncomfortable expression she had when she'd caught them talking yesterday, but she

plowed on nonetheless.

"How do you two think you did?"

"Well, I don't think I *failed*," Henry offered, Nancy and Barb smiling, "But, I certainly didn't ace it."

"No one aces Kaminsky," Barb replied, Henry sending her a look.

"I've *seen* your 100% exams."

Barb rolled her eyes, but Henry could tell from her smile that his words were more appreciated than she was letting on. Nancy smiled too, but Henry tried to ignore that one. Not that she was annoying or had an ugly smile or anything, it was just... He knew what that smile meant—he'd seen it on his mother's face when he'd had Barb over for dinner—and he didn't like it. Didn't like to even *think* about it.

"I have to run to my next class, but, um, Barb?" Nancy said, catching her friend's attention so she could speak a little bit lower, a little more intimately, "Don't forget about the, uh, thing."

"Right, yeah," Barb said, sounding distinctly uncomfortable. Nancy just smiled though, probably because she read Barb's discomfort as being something different than what it was, and she started walking away.

"I'll see you later. Nice talking to you, Henry."

"You too," Henry replied, waiting until Nancy was out of earshot before he looked over at Barb, "'The thing?'"

"A party," Barb said hesitantly, Henry raising an eyebrow.

"Since when do Barbara Holland and Nancy Wheeler go to parties?" He asked, only a little bit joking.

"Since Nancy's started dating Steve Harrington," Barb replied, getting only silence at that. There was too much history there for Henry to get snappy, "His parents are out of town, and he invited us and Tommy H and Carol over. Nancy was talking to me earlier about asking you to come."



"Oh," Henry offered.

"I guess she thinks you and I are..." Barb trailed off, but Henry understood all the same.

"Not surprising," he said, shrugging slightly in an attempt to make this not awkward.

"Yeah, not surprising," Barb murmured to herself, before she looked up at Henry, "So, what do you think? Do you want to come?"

"Uh..."

It's not that Henry didn't want to. He liked parties, he was usually invited to the bigger ones, and when he went he always had a good time. He liked dancing, talking, and drinking until he felt loose enough to forget his problems, but not enough to let things slip. And he liked doing things with Barb. She understood him, maybe more than anyone else, and it was nice to be around someone like that after spending so long feeling alone. But, there was one glaring problem with all of this.

Steve Harrington.

There wasn't a single doubt in Henry's mind that he was the biggest douchebag to ever walk the halls of Hawkins High.

He couldn't imagine what it was like for Barb to have her best friend—the person she cared about so deeply—start messing around with him. Steve, Tommy H, and Carol were all so obnoxious that Henry did everything he could to avoid having to interact with them. Sure, when fate pushed him into a situation where he had to, he was nothing but amicable—he didn't even think they *realized* he disliked them—but the entire time he'd be holding back the eye rolls and sharp words that rested right on the tip of his tongue. Thankfully, that never lasted long (King Steve had more important things to do than mingle with Henry Sinclair), and he could go right back to trying to pretend he didn't exist.

And yeah, sure, maybe the reason he disliked Steve more than anyone else was because, unlike Tommy H or really any of the other

assholes (who were probably worse than him), he was actually kind of *cute*. But, great hair and a nice face meant absolutely nothing when you were a rich kid doing the most he can to be the biggest prick on the planet. Seriously, what a complete waste.

He wouldn't admit this to just anyone—he didn't need people running their mouths all over school—but Barb knew. Barb had brought him up enough times with a sneer that he'd felt comfortable enough to let her know his true feelings. It had been a bonding point early on, when they were still new to being friends and being understood, and although he'd never know it, Steve Harrington had made Henry and Barb better friends just by being the worst.

And so, when she asked, there was no hiding how he really felt about going to a party at his house.

"Forget it," Barb said, Henry's expression immediately dropping.

"Hey, wait, I'll go," he protested, "I mean, he's not my favorite person, but I don't want you to feel alone or anything. If you want me there, I will be."

"I don't," Barb said bluntly, Henry's brow furrowing, "I don't want you there. You know why?"

"Because I'm an asshole?" Henry hazard a guess, Barb laughing slightly and shaking her head. When she looked up at him again, and he saw her soft gaze, Henry knew that his guess had been way off.

"They don't deserve you."

"What?" Henry asked, his brow still furrowed but now his lips pulling up slightly at the edges.

"They don't deserve you," Barb repeated, "You are just too good for them. They don't deserve to be your friend, or to have you at their party, or even to know you."

Henry stopped and Barb followed suit; neither one giving a single thought to how they blocked the hallway. Instead, they just looked at each other. Barb, with nothing but sincerity on her expression, and Henry, with something soft on his that most people would never get

to see.

"You want to hang out later this week?" Henry finally asked, his voice quieter now, "Celebrate making it through that test?"

"I would like that a lot," Barb replied, with a moment of comfortable silence following, "I've got to get to my next class."

"Yeah, me too," Henry said, the pair smiling at each other for one more moment before they broke apart. Henry heading down one way of the Hawkins' High halls, and Barb going down the other.

But, before either could get far, Henry found himself stopping and looking over to see his friend starting to disappear into the crowd.

"Hey, Barb?" He called, catching her attention just in time. She turned to him with an expectant expression, but not impatient or annoyed. Just, openness and acceptance, like it always was between them.

"They don't deserve you either."

Neither one said anything more, and after a moment they'd break apart and head towards their classes, but it didn't matter. Their smiles said everything.

That evening was a quiet one. Lucas was having dinner with the Wheelers and Henry's parents were still a bit muted from the night before. Henry wasn't sure whether it was because they'd been up later than usual, or because there was still no sign of Will Byers, but he didn't ask. Instead, he just ate his food in relative silence; only speaking when spoken to, which wasn't very much at all.

"Henry, Honey?" Judith said, pulling her son's attention away from his plate, "Have you noticed Lucas acting strange lately?"

Henry had never been more thankful for the "no talking with your mouth full" rule than in that moment. He had a hard time lying to his mother, even if he'd spent a lot of his life doing just that. It was the direct questions that tripped him up; he usually waited too long between hearing them and answering. It gave him right away. But, since he'd just taken a large bite of chicken, he was in luck, and his pause was covered by his chewing.

"Yeah, I guess," Henry said, not making eye contact, "But, I mean, his friend's missing."

"No, more recent than that," Judith replied, Henry holding back a wince, "This morning, he was—he was just weird, right?"

"Maybe it's just setting in?" He offered, trying to cover up his actual thoughts, which all pointed to the truth being a big fat *yes*.

Yes, Lucas was acting weird. He'd been acting weird ever since Henry had decided it was A-Okay for three twelve year olds to go out in the woods, at night, by themselves, looking for a fourth twelve year old who had gone missing due to unknown causes. But frankly, Henry didn't feel like opening those floodgates onto himself and Lucas, so he kept his mouth shut about it. He doubted that the (deserved) wrath that would be rained on the two of them would help much anyway.

"I don't understand how anyone can tell if Lucas is acting weird," Erica piped up, drawing her family's attention to her, "Lucas is *always* weird."

Charles cleared his throat, and Erica's expression immediately morphed into the picture of innocence, as if they hadn't all *just* heard her trash talk her brother. Henry and his mother exchanged a glance with their lips pulling up, and although his father rolled his eyes, there was no denying that he was also almost smiling.

Dinner continued in companionable silence, and it felt as if there was nothing in the world that could disrupt their family's serenity.

"Have you seen Barb?"

Henry looked up from where he was shoving his notebook in his backpack without having fully processed the question. It was already the end of second period, but he still wasn't fully present. He'd been up late last night; his mind a jumble of all the anxieties pressing down on him. Everything from Will Byers being missing to Lucas acting weird to Barb going to a party had plagued his thoughts, and made it nearly impossible to fall asleep. He'd finally managed it in the hours that could be classified as both late night and early morning.

He'd been taking it easy, mostly out of necessity, but now Nancy Wheeler was standing in front of his desk with a concerning frown, and he didn't feel so laid-back anymore.

"No," He replied, just now realizing that was a little strange, "Is something wrong?"

"She wasn't in class earlier," Nancy said, her frown not letting up for a second.

"Maybe she's skipping," Henry offered, reassuring himself more than anything else.

"That's not like Barb, though," Nancy replied, Henry nodding as he zipped his backpack closed.

"Yeah, but it's also not like Barb to go to a party," he said, standing and shrugging slightly, "Who knows. She could just be taking a day."

"You know about Steve's?" Nancy said, her concern briefly disappearing behind confusion.

"Barb told me." Henry's reply was simple, but it was enough to evoke a surprised response.

"Oh, I thought..." Nancy trailed off, and it was easy to tell that she'd realized that what she was thinking wasn't appropriate to say to Henry's face. But, rather than let her flounder, Henry spoke again as he already began to edge past her towards the door.

"Not my scene."

Henry managed to slip past Nancy before she could say anything else, but now that she'd brought it to his attention that Barb wasn't at school, it was all he could think about.

Last night, when his mind had turned to Barb, he'd thought about how she'd never been to a party. At least, not one with drinking and flirting and other things parents frown upon. He couldn't help but worry about how she was handling it. Don't get him wrong, he knew she was a big girl who could drink a beer if she wanted to, it was just... with Steve, Tommy, and Carol? They *thrived* off of tearing into

people who didn't meet their expectations of cool. Hesitant around alcohol? Prepare to be taunted for the rest of the night (and maybe even at school if they really didn't like you). Henry didn't want that to happen to Barb.

He'd had half a mind to go to the stupid party, but whenever he felt a particularly strong urge to hop in his car and drive over, he'd remember Barb's words, and he'd find himself falling back into his pillows.

Now he was starting to wonder if that had been the wrong thing to do.

Nancy hadn't said anything about how it had gone last night, but he hadn't exactly given her much of a chance. He would admit that he'd rushed out of that conversation a little bit, but he knew it was better than snapping at Nancy. She hadn't done anything wrong, not really, but between the way she made Barb feel and the assumptions she made about them, he felt something a little bitter in his throat when he looked at her.

As Henry pushed the door to his next class open, he also pushed away thoughts of Nancy Wheeler. He needed to talk to Barb, see if she was doing okay. He was new to this whole "best friend" thing, but he knew well enough that this fell under things he should do to be a good one. If she didn't show herself by the end of the day, he'd call her after school. Maybe even go over to her house if whatever was keeping her from school was that bad.

And maybe it was because he'd gone two nights in a row without getting enough sleep, but just like that, it was the end of the day. Henry hoped that in his trance he'd managed to take some halfway decent notes, because god knows his brain hadn't retained *any* of it.

As he walked out of a classroom he only halfway recalled walking into, he struggled to remember if they'd been assigned any homework or not. Although a part of him wanted to leave it up to chance and hope they hadn't, he knew he would only find out otherwise and lose his shit the next time he went to class. So, when he caught sight of some familiar blonde curls, he picked up the pace slightly.

"Hey, Mary!"

Henry waved slightly when she turned, and she waited for him to get closer before speaking.

"Hey," she said with a small smile she screamed *we're just acquaintances*. They'd nearly been friends last year, when they'd been lab partners—bonded over a mutual appreciation for Madonna and a mutual hatred for frog dissections—but it had ended after that class. Henry knew he could've kept up that friendship, that people would think he probably *should've*, but he hadn't. Mary was nice and cool and funny, but he knew better than that. He knew better than getting close.

"Do we have homework?" He asked, reaching out to hold the door open for her.

"Yeah," Mary said, walking past him but waiting for him to catch up before she continued walking, "We're supposed to do the reading and then write a page on what we think the author was trying to convey with the story."

"The reading?" Henry said hesitantly, Mary snorting and sending him a look.

"You *really* weren't paying attention, huh?" She said, her smile letting him know that she thought it was more cute than anything else, "Chapter 12, *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson."

"*The Lottery*. Shirley Jackson," Henry repeated, hoping that would be enough for him to remember, "Okay. Thanks, Mary."

"No problem," she replied, but before Henry could head off to his car, she spoke again, "It's because of Barbara Holland, right?"

Henry paused, and looked over at her as his stomach sank. He didn't say anything, but he didn't have to; his expression was enough for Mary to smile and nod slightly.

"Ally said she wasn't in class. And she told me a couple of days ago she saw you two giggling together in the halls," she said before chuckling slightly, "Jesus, you don't have to look so guilty. It's sweet.

She's sweet."

Henry forced a small smile at that, but he didn't say anything. He couldn't. He'd known this was coming, but it still stung and he had no idea how to deal with it. Let people think that and keep it as a safety net for the two of them? Or try to squash it right now so he wouldn't have to face those knowing smiles anymore?

Thankfully, he didn't need to respond at all, because something else caught Mary's attention.

"Um... you can go on ahead, I'm going to wait here until this finishes."

Henry frowned, not knowing what she was talking about for a moment, before he turned to look the same direction as Mary and his eyes fell on the group of people converged beside an older Ford LTD (parked next to Mary's Toyota Carina). Instantly, a bitter taste developed in his throat as he took in the scene.

They were too far to really hear anything, but close enough to easily grasp what was unfolding in the middle of the Hawkins' High parking lot. Steve Harrington, in all of his douchbaggery and fluffy haired glory, was glaring down at Jonathan Byers with a glint in his eye that made Henry's insides squirm. Instead of dwelling on what exactly *that* reaction was, Henry focused on the heat that began to flare in his chest. It was a dangerous feeling, he knew it. The kind of feeling that made people do stupid things, like stalk across a parking lot to defend the school freak from the people who could make his life at school hell on earth.

"Jesus," Henry muttered under his breath, just barely controlling that feeling now, "Are they *really* picking on the guy whose little brother is missing?"

"You didn't hear?" Mary said, Henry not looking away from what was happening but shaking his head nonetheless, "You're *really* out of it without Barb."

"What happened?" Henry said, deciding to ignore that last part.



"Jonathan Byers took creepy pictures of Nancy Wheeler from the woods."

"*What?*" Henry replied, snapping his head to look over at her. All at once, what had burned inside of him disappeared, and only a shocked hollowness remained. Of all the reasons for them to be bullying Jonathan, he wouldn't have guessed one that was so... so... *justifiable*.

"Yeah, apparently Harrington and her and their friends were all hanging out at his house and Jonathan took pictures of them. Nicole caught him developing them in the darkroom," Mary said, leaning in closer and speaking in a lower tone, "Apparently the ones of Nancy are particularly scandalous."

"That's..." Henry didn't even finish his sentence, he couldn't think of a word that fully encompassed what he was feeling right now.

The righteous anger that had been so hard to control not moments ago was nowhere to be found now. He doubted he would've done anything even if Jonathan Byers was completely innocent in this situation, but he would've felt that burning of injustice in his core and the guilt of not doing anything in his stomach. In a way, he was almost happy that Jonathan was a total creep, because that absolved him from doing anything. It meant he didn't have to deal with the fact that he was a coward today.

*Almost* happy.

Mostly just sick.

Because that was awful. Nancy being violated like that was awful. Steve Harrington, Tommy H, and Carol being violated like that was awful.

*Barb* being violated like that was awful.

He needed to get home and call her. He needed to find out *exactly* why she hadn't been at school today.

Rather than continue to watch this all go down, Henry turned in the direction of his car. He didn't care anymore. He didn't care about the way Steve and his buddies loomed over Jonathan, he didn't care

about the conversation he'd had with Jonathan yesterday, he didn't care that it had been one of the most genuine exchanges he'd had outside of Lucas and Barb in a while. All he could think about was getting home and making sure that his best friend was okay.

The sound of Jonathan's camera smashing against the pavement echoed throughout the parking lot, but Henry didn't even care enough to look.

"You doing okay over there, Henry?"

It had been another mostly silent dinner at the Sinclair's, and uncommon occurrence that had now happened two nights in a row. But, it was explainable: Lucas was off with his friends again, and without him or Henry pushing along the conversation, the table took on a certain muted tone.

When his mother's words had cut through the silence, Henry had looked up from where he was pushing his food around on his plate and over to her, only to find that she'd been looking at him with barely concealed concern.

"Yep," he offered, stabbing a piece of broccoli and shoving it in his mouth, hoping that would be the end of it. It never was.

"How was school?" Judith attempted casually, not really pulling it off.

"Fine."

"How's Barb?" Judith asked, hitting on the heart of the issue without fully realizing it. It took a moment, but Henry finally just shrugged, unsure of what to say, "Heard you asking for her on the phone earlier."

"Yeah," Henry replied slowly, "Her parents said she was at Nancy Wheeler's."

That wasn't a lie. It wasn't. Her parents *had* said that. He just happened to know that was completely false. But, it wasn't a lie, just like how he hadn't lied to Mrs. Holland. He just neglected to mention that he knew Barb wasn't at Nancy's, and that Nancy was starting to get worried.

He knew he should've told her, but he just couldn't. Maybe because telling her would mean that it was real, or maybe he was just scared of what would happen if Barb was actually fine and he totally blew her cover. Either way, he'd chosen the coward's way out and had just accepted what Mrs. Holland said without questioning it; hanging up while a terrible feeling blossomed in his chest. A feeling that hadn't left him, and only grew more and more oppressive as time went on.

"Well, I'm sure she'll be happy to talk to you tomorrow," Judith said, trying to reassure her son even though she didn't really know what she was talking about. Henry tried to appreciate the effort, but he just couldn't get himself to care about anything other than the sick feeling in his stomach.

"Can I be excused?" He said instead, both of his parents frowning at that, "My car was making a funny sound on the way home and I want to take a look at it."

*Not a lie.*

"You barely touched your dinner," Judith pointed out, Henry shrugging.

"Not hungry, I guess."

*Not a lie.*

"What about your homework?" His father piped up.

"Finished it right after school."

*Not a lie.*

"Well, clear your dishes," Judith finally said, clearly reluctant to let him go, but unable to find a reason to make him stay at the table. Henry gathered up his plate and glass before kicking his chair in as he headed towards the kitchen counter. Only once he'd emptied his plate into the garbage (only feeling minor guilt at throwing out some perfectly good food) and dropped his dishes into the sink did anyone in the Sinclair family speak. Only this time it wasn't one of the adults prying at their son, or Henry trying to gently deflect their questions.

"You're acting weird," Erica said, judgmental and suspicious as ever, "You're acting like *Lucas*. Do you two have some weird nerd secret or something?"

Henry felt both of his parents' eyes on him. They didn't even try to correct Erica's attitude like they usually did, probably because what she'd said had hit a chord with them. They were too interested in the answer to care about how the question had been asked.

He didn't reply for a moment, but just as quick as the silence had settled on them, it was broken. Henry's winning smile appeared (although the ends didn't curl up quite right) and he spoke.

"Lucas and I aren't hiding anything. Don't worry about it."

*Lie.*

Henry had found the cause of the funny sound his car was making in six minutes, he'd fixed it in thirteen.

He was in the garage for over two hours

Some of that time had been devoted to other parts of the car; little tune ups here and there, and checking to make sure that his old fixes were still holding up and he wouldn't have to repair them soon. Hell, he'd even cleaned out the backseat, which had started to accumulate a little too much garbage for comfort. But, most of it had been spent pretending to work on his car, while actually just using it as an excuse for quiet contemplation. He'd always found spending time alone in the garage to be calming, kind of like meditation. And it still was. He felt more relaxed than he had been at the dinner table. But, there was still a deep-seated anxiety tugging at his nerves that not even being under the hood of the Oldsmobile could get rid of.

He knew one thing that would help. But, his parents were still up, and with the way he'd been acting earlier he wouldn't be surprised if one of them ducked into the garage to check on him. He wasn't in the mood to be caught doing something he shouldn't be, so he managed to keep himself from dipping into the stash he kept hidden in his toolbox.

He considered going for a drive, a surefire way he wouldn't get caught, but he quickly realized that there was no way he could bring himself to leave the house right now. Not if there was a chance of a phone call coming his way.

Henry sighed and leaned against the hood of his car; feeling more trapped than ever. His friend was nowhere to be found and here he was, stuck in his garage, pretending to fix a car so he didn't have to deal with his parents. He didn't know what to do in this situation, but he knew that this wasn't it.

Henry rubbed his face as his mind continued to assault him with all sorts of insults and stupid ideas, but he dropped his hands and looked up when the familiar sound of wheels on pavement reached his ears.

"Hey, man," he called into the darkness beyond the garage door, pushing aside his anxieties for now, "What's going—?"

Lucas fully came into view and Henry stopped short, silence falling between the two Sinclair boys for a moment. Even the sound of pedaling was gone, because Lucas had stopped once he'd made it to the entrance of the garage and had made no move to do anything but stare at his big brother with a strange expression. The kind of expression that tipped Henry off immediately and set off a sinking feeling in his stomach. After far too many unbearably quiet seconds ticked by with both of them frozen in their spots, Henry spoke with a hushed voice he so rarely used.

"What happened?"

Lucas's bike fell to the pavement with a crash. Whatever had held him in place just moments ago was gone now, and he rushed across the space between them; nearly knocking Henry over with the force that he hit him with. But, he didn't care, and he hugged his brother back with just as much intensity.

Henry didn't ask. He didn't ask when Lucas grabbed onto him like he was the only thing anchoring him to the Earth. He didn't ask when Lucas shook in his arms harder than he ever had before. He didn't ask when Lucas's hot tears soaked through his shirt sleeve. Instead, he just tightened his embrace, as if that would make this all better. As if

Henry could take away all of his little brother's pain just by holding him close.

In the end, it wouldn't matter if Henry asked, because Lucas would answer any questions unprompted, all with a single word muttered between sobs.

*"Will."*

Henry pulled him impossibly closer, only this time it was for his own benefit. This time it was so he could be absolutely certain that his own little brother was right here, safe. This time it was so he could find his own comfort in his brother as images of a sensitive young boy who cried at Star Wars paired with the knowledge that something terrible had happened forced their way into his mind.

But, he didn't let that show. Instead, he focused on Lucas, who buried his face in his neck as he cried. He rubbed circles on his back and never let up his grip on him; whispering soft reassurances even though he knew how hollow they were right now.

"It's okay. It's going to be okay. I promise."

*Lie.*

## 4. emotional overload

"If you don't shut him the hell up..."

Henry let the rest of his threat go un-mumbled, mostly because he was too tired to even try to think of some consequence that would undoubtedly go unfulfilled. Instead, he just burrowed deeper into the pillows and tried to block out the static-y sounds of Mike Wheeler.

He didn't know if this was a common occurrence, Mike bothering his brother at—Henry rolled over and grimaced—9:42 in the morning.

Alright, in his defense, he'd been up most of the night.

*"Lucas, Lucas, Lucas, Lucas, Lucas, Lucas, Lucas, Lucas, Lucas—."*

"Dude, just answer!" Henry said, raising his head from his pillow to use a tone he regretted immediately. Just because Mike was being annoying didn't mean that he should just snap at his grieving brother. Thankfully, it didn't seem to hurt Lucas's feelings too deeply, because he just sat up and grabbed the walkie-talkie.

"Go away, Mike," he said, his voice a forced calm that made Henry swallow a little hard, "I'm not in the mood, alright? Over and out."

*"No, not 'out.' I'm not messing around, okay? This is about Will."*

It was quiet as Mike's words sunk in for the two Sinclair boys. Even though he was looking at him from the back, Henry could see how Lucas had tensed. Finally, he took it upon himself to break the silence.

"Hey, I'm going to go take a shower," Henry said softly, because even though he might say otherwise, he knew that Lucas needed his friends right now more than anything, and that meant giving him privacy, "Just... shout if you need me."

"Okay," Lucas said, not making a move to reply to Mike until Henry had stumbled out of bed and walked past his doorway. Distantly, he could hear how his brother was mumbling into the walkie-talkie, but he forced himself to ignore it. He didn't have to exercise too much

self-restraint when the sound of the shower running drowned it all out.

Once he was under the hot water, he felt a tension he hadn't even noticed in his shoulders and back disappear. He wasn't relaxed, not exactly, but he felt a lot better. Not light, but lighter.

But, that all came crashing down when everything that happened in the past 12 hours came flooding back. His brother coming home in tears and the terrible sick feelings that came with that; having to be the one to explain what had happened to his parents; getting Lucas to bed and comforting him through the night while his own anxieties and grief continued to press down on him; and his mother coming into Lucas's room earlier that morning, and telling him that she'd called them both out of school with a look on her face that he never wanted to see again. It had all been so much, *so much* to handle. So much so that he'd hardly had the chance to consider everything *else*.

Barb.

Somehow, in the midst of everything, his best friend's unknown whereabouts had taken a backseat. Yeah, sure, maybe that was normal. Maybe it was to be expected when a missing child's body is found to put everything else aside, but... He'd *forgotten*. Henry had *forgotten* about Barb. And maybe... maybe it wasn't just because of—because of *Will*. Maybe it was because of Henry. Maybe it was because he didn't want to admit it to himself.

Barbara Holland was *missing*.

That *horrible* truth now acknowledged, the guilt that Henry had been barely holding back crashed down on him in waves. Thoughts of Barb mingled with ones of Will, and for the first time since this awful turn of events had started, Henry cried.

The house was quiet when Henry got out of the shower, and he didn't even need to look at the note on his bed to know that Lucas had left. Henry had rolled his eyes slightly at the hastily scribbled message, but he didn't feel too bad about his brother ditching him. He knew he needed his friends right now and besides, it was probably best for Henry to be alone right now. He'd cried himself out, but he still felt a



little tender. Like if you pressed him, he'd break a little easier than usual.

Now, with the house all to himself, the quiet felt more oppressive than soothing. He considered turning on some music to just disrupt the silence, but no sooner did he think that did he dismiss it. It felt wrong. Wrong to try to push away all the discomfort with music while... while all of this happened.

He could call the Hollands again, he supposed. Maybe they would pick up and tell him that Barb had stopped by to get breakfast before running off to school. Or maybe that she was skipping today because she wasn't feeling too well, but that she'd call him once she was better. Maybe at least one part of this nightmare wouldn't be so bad.

Or maybe it wouldn't be.

Maybe he would call and she wouldn't be there. Maybe he would call and Mrs. Holland would finally understand that something was wrong. Maybe he would call and Barb would still be missing.

He needed to get out of here.

Henry grabbed his coat off the hanger and grabbed his keys out of the bowl; feeling like he *needed* to get out of this house. Like, if he didn't, he'd explode or suffocate or *something*. With that unending weight crushing down on him, Henry jerked the door open, only to come face-to-face with possibly the last person he would expect on his front porch.

Nancy Wheeler.

She looked just as surprised as he felt, with her hand posed to knock, and suddenly Henry felt a little sheepish about his hurried actions.

"Hi," he finally managed, unsure of what to say.

"Hi," Nancy replied, equally as awkward.

It was quiet for a moment.

"Um..." Henry finally started, looking around as if someone was going

to jump out and reveal this was all a prank or something, "Is there a reason you're standing on my front porch?"

"Oh, right, yeah, yeah," Nancy said, shaking her head slightly and almost smiling, probably at herself for how silly she'd been acting, "I know this is weird, but... can we talk?"

"So, I went back to Steve's and her car was still there. And... I went to go look for her in the woods and I swear I saw a man there, but... I know how this sounds, but he didn't have a face. And I can't help but feel that he—*he* did something to Barb."

Henry's frown deepened as Nancy slowly told her story. He hadn't said a word since they'd sat down at the kitchen table, and instead just let her go without interruption. But, that changed now, because it was clear from her expression that she wouldn't be saying anything else unless he prompted her.

"Did you tell anyone about this?" He asked, Nancy laughing in a wet way that let Henry know that his question was way more loaded than he had expected.

"My mom, and she called the police, but... They don't care. They think she ran away, but I know she didn't. Barb wouldn't *do* that."

"Even if she did she wouldn't leave her car," Henry offered, Nancy looking up at him with wide eyes, almost as if she hadn't expected for him to agree with her.

"Yes! Exactly!" Nancy said, almost sounding excited as she reached down into the bag she'd brought, "And-and I know how what I saw in the woods sounds crazy. But, just look at this."

She laid a reassembled picture out on the table that Henry immediately recognized even though he'd never seen it before. It was of a house Henry had only ever been to once—a party he'd left after thirty-five minutes—but that wasn't what caught his attention. All he saw was the lone person sitting on the diving board, wearing that morose expression that Henry recognized as Barb's heartbreak.

"This was one of Jonathan Byers's pictures, right?" Henry chose to

say, his voice a little quieter than before.

"Yeah," Nancy confirmed, "But, look right here."

Nancy's finger pulled Henry's eyes away from the image of his friend (*last known picture* his mind supplied unhelpfully) and to the blurry mass in the corner. He squinted, trying to make sense of what he was seeing, before what Nancy had said came back to him.

*A man without a face.*

"Nancy..." Henry said slowly, his frown deepening as he took in the eerie moment that Jonathan had unknowingly captured.

"It's not great, I know," she said, defending herself against imaginary criticism, "But, if we go to Jonathan, maybe he can make it clearer? Or at least make one that isn't torn? I don't know, but... But, this is the only proof I have."

"You want to go find Jonathan Byers and have him develop another picture that he took of you and your friends from the woods, so that you can prove that a man without a face did something to Barb," Henry said simply, Nancy's cheeks pinkening at that description. She dropped her eyes to the ground and cleared her throat before she replied.

"Yeah."

Henry nodded slightly before standing, Nancy sighing in frustration when he did. Although, he had no idea if it was at him or at herself. But, he didn't comment on that, just smiled ruefully.

"Let me get my keys."

"Do you mind?"

Nancy frowned, wondering if having the window rolled down was bothering Henry, before she looked over to see what he was shaking out of the familiar cardboard carton.

"Go ahead," she replied, Henry forcing a smile in response before he stuck the cigarette in between his teeth. He patted his pockets before

frowning.

"Hey, is there a lighter in the glove box?" He asked, Nancy opening it and digging underneath the official papers to find a red plastic one, which she handed over to him, "Thanks."

It was quiet for a moment as Henry lit his cigarette and took a puff, Nancy doing her best not to stare as he blew the smoke out the window.

"I didn't realize you smoked," she said finally, Henry shrugging.

"Only when I'm stressed."

"Well, with the way this week has been, maybe I should start too," Nancy replied, only partially joking.

"Wouldn't recommend it," Henry said, shrugging, "It's a bad habit. I used to smoke all the time, but I've been trying to quit. Now it's only sometimes. When things get... a little overwhelming."

"I think we're past a 'little overwhelming,'" Nancy replied, smiling when Henry did, despite the circumstances. It was hard *not* to smile.

"You said your mom called the police, but that they didn't care," he said after a moment, the small smile on Nancy's lips slipping away, "What did you mean? Did Hopper just tell her to stop worrying and hang up?"

"It wasn't Hopper, it was two other officers," Nancy said, sighing as she remembered the questioning at her school, "And, they didn't even care about Barb. They just asked me what I was doing at Steve's that late and they kept giving each other these *looks* and *laughing* like it was some funny joke."

It was quiet for a moment as Nancy stewed in that memory; her cheeks burning as she remembered the looks on those two officers' faces as they made her admit in front of her *mother* that she'd been upstairs with Steve that night. It had been *humiliating*.

"Fucking pigs."

Nancy's head snapped over in surprise. Of all the things she'd expected to fall from Henry's lips, she'd never in a million years guessed *that*. He seemed a little surprised by his words too, or maybe he was just uncertain because he didn't know how she was going to react to that. He sent her a sideways glance and took another puff from his cigarette; Nancy realizing that maybe she was getting a clearer look at Henry than most people did.

"Yeah," Nancy finally said, smiling slightly, "Fucking pigs."

The trepidation on Henry's face melted away and was replaced by a wide smile. The kind that said *"I can't believe what just happened but I'm happy about it."* all while being just as sunny as ever. Nancy's own grew in response and she couldn't help but understand just what Barb had seen in this guy.

"This feels weird."

Nancy turned to see that at some point, Henry had stopped and wasn't walking with her anymore. She stopped too, but before she said anything, she followed his eyes to the sign that hung over the somber building they were entering.

*Cunningham Funeral Home.*

Nancy sighed before she looked over at her companion again. Henry's expression was miles away from the smile he'd worn in the car, and instead there was only unease and discomfort. She'd never seen that type of look on his face before, not even before a final, and in turn, her own mood sank. It was never that high to begin with, though.

"I just feel like we shouldn't be bothering him. Not right now," Henry said, finally pulling his eyes away to meet Nancy's, "His brother..."

Nancy nodded in understanding, mulling over her words before she spoke.

"If it was the other way around, if Will was the one missing and Barb was—" Her voice gave out, but she pushed through, "And you might have something that would help Jonathan find Will, what would you want?"

Henry shut his eyes and breathed hard through his nose, and the seconds ticked by with an immeasurable silence. For a brief moment Nancy wondered if she'd finally lost him. If men without faces or grainy pictures hadn't been Henry's breaking point, but instead just the thought of the pain Jonathan was feeling right now had pushed him over the edge.

"If there was even a chance of someone being found, I would want him to come ask me," Henry said, catching Nancy by surprise. But, before she could respond, he opened his eyes to send her a wry look, "You do realize we're banking on the guy who took pictures of strangers from the woods to be as good people as we are, right?"

"It's worth a shot. He might surprise us," Nancy replied before her lips pulled into something just as wry as Henry's expression, "Might."

Henry snorted slightly and nodded; Nancy feeling something inside of her release as he finally moved. He walked right past her and held the door open. He didn't have to say a word to let her know where he had landed.

Nancy found herself second guessing that the moment they stepped inside.

As they stepped into the stuffy and eerily quiet funeral home, the two teens exchanged a look. Both silently asked the other if they were going to run right back out and wait to ambush Jonathan when he was done in here. But, both came to the same conclusion, and both continued to walk deeper into the building; following the faint sound of voices.

Nancy headed towards and open door before coming to a sudden stop, Henry a few steps behind and entering the doorway a second later. Just in time to see the way shock flitted across Jonathan's face, enough that it displaced the grief on his features, if only for a moment.

Jonathan closed the distance between himself and the two teens and when he finally stopped, he looked at both of them with an apprehensive expression. Almost as if he expected them to do something to hurt him. Which, on one hand, was sad to think about.

But, on the other, Henry did realize how weird it must seem to have *Nancy Wheeler* show up at the funeral home with *Henry Sinclair* of all people. Who would know what to expect.

"Can we talk to you for a second?" Henry asked, as smooth as he could be given the circumstances, and Jonathan nodded.

"The cops think she ran away. But they don't know Barb..."

Henry swallowed around the lump in his throat. Hearing the story for the second time hurt more for some reason. His brain could hardly comprehend it the first time around, but now... Now all he could think about was all the things that could've happened to his best friend.

"I went back to Steve's, and I thought I saw something," Nancy continued, her words coming slower now, "Some weird man or... I don't know what it was."

It was quiet for a second, before Nancy looked up and made eye contact with Jonathan and the realization that had hit Henry outside came crashing down on her.

"I'm sorry," she said, reaching for her bag and pushing herself off of the bench, "I shouldn't have come here today. I'm..."

Nancy began to shuffle away, but Henry made no move to follow. Instead, he turned his eyes away from her and to Jonathan, who hadn't moved from his spot on the bench either. He met his eyes without hesitation, a stark contrast from the last time they'd spoken, and Henry realized that the look in his eyes wasn't disbelief, or anger, or even grief. It was something *odd*, something that had Henry speaking even though Nancy was trying to make an exit.

"Nancy saw a man—."

"—Without a face."

Jonathan's words caused Henry to stiffen and Nancy to whirl around to face him. It was quiet, a different kind than before. It was the kind of quiet that happens when people come to the sudden realization that they're all thinking the same thing.

And that thing was that something was very, *very* wrong.

"I can show you how to tie a tie."

Jonathan shot a look over at Henry, who kept his eyes on the ground and his expression neutral, but neither one slowed their movements. They just kept walking, getting further and further away from the group of people huddled around the grave.

"What makes you think I can't?" Jonathan finally asked, sounding defensive even though he clearly was trying to keep his tone even.

Henry didn't reply, he just made sure he had Jonathan's attention before looking over his shoulder at the man shaking the hands of every funeral attendee, and then looked at Jonathan significantly. Jonathan dropped his gaze down at his shoes with a bitter expression, and it was quiet for a moment.

"Has anyone ever told you that your dad is a jackass?"

That caught Jonathan's attention, and he looked up sharply to find Henry with a casual nonchalance on his face.

"Well... I used to be able to hear my mom scream that at him through the walls," Jonathan replied, matching Henry's bluntness with his own, "But, no. No one's said it to my face."

"Your dad's a jackass."

Jonathan snorted, and although he didn't turn his head, Henry glanced out of the corner of his eyes in time to catch the small smile pulling at his lips. They reached a small spot far enough away from the funeral that they wouldn't be noticed, and they both sat down on the grass with their backs to some fenced off graves to wait for the third member of their little group.

After a moment, Henry reached into his pocket and pulled out a box of Camels; not mentioning them until he caught the way Jonathan watched him place a cigarette between his teeth.

"Want one?" He offered, Jonathan dropping his eyes and shaking his head.



"Just..." he muttered before smiling slightly, "That's the same brand my mom smokes."

"You're not trying to insult me are you?" Henry asked, his lips quirking up slightly at the ends, "Because I'm *proud* to be addicted to the same cancer sticks as your mom."

That coaxed a genuine laugh out of Jonathan, but it stopped suddenly. As if he was a record and someone had lifted the needle. Henry looked over to see a funny look on Jonathan's face, and it took a moment for him to realize what had stopped him.

*Guilt.*

Henry glanced back at the mass of people, which was mostly dispersing now. But, some still shook hands with Lonnie and ignored Joyce, and he felt a brief flash of guilt in his own chest. But, he pushed it away, and instead said what needed to be said.

"We're going to find him. Both of them."

"You really think that?" Jonathan said softly, Henry looking him dead in the eye.

"Yeah," he replied, not stumbling for even a second, "I really do."

Jonathan met his gaze for a moment longer, clearly looking for any sign that he was lying. When he didn't find it, he dropped his eyes back to the grass. It was quiet, this time long enough for Henry to finish his cigarette, before a new voice broke the silence.

"Hey."

Nancy sat down on the other side of Jonathan, and the three teenagers sent each other their best imitations of smiles before they got into it. Henry stubbed out his cigarette on the concrete base of the fence as Jonathan reached into his pocket and retrieved a small map.

"This is where we know for sure it's been, right?" He said, Henry and Nancy leaning over his shoulders to look.

"So, that's...?" Nancy pointed at one of Jonathan's Xs.

"Steve's house. And that's the woods where they found Will's bike and that's my house."

"It's all so close," Nancy observed.

"Exactly. I mean, it's all within a mile or something," Jonathan replied, Henry humming softly.

"Then it's like most animals," he said, not looking up from the map, "It doesn't stray far from its nest... Which would make it easy to find."

Jonathan locked eyes with Henry and wordlessly communicated what he was thinking. What they both were. Nancy sighed softly before she put words to what was in all of their minds.

"You two want to go out there."

"A mile radius is still pretty big," Henry offered, hoping to smooth over whatever anxieties Nancy had with a lie.

"I still found it," she countered, looking between the both of them, "If we do, then what?"

Jonathan and Henry made eye contact once again, and they both knew exactly what the other one was thinking. The answer to Nancy's question.

"We kill it."

The only sound that filled the Sinclair living room was the *Match Game-Hollywood Squares Hour*. Erica was really the only one paying attention to the show, and was watching it with an amount of rapture that only came after a long day of being bored. Mr. Sinclair sat in the armchair with the paper, and Mrs. Sinclair sat on the couch, folding laundry. It was a mindless task though, and that was why she was able to send looks up towards the stairs, where she could just see the shut door of her youngest son's room.

"Do you think he's okay?" She asked the room at large, but when she didn't get a response, she honed in on her son on the other end of the

couch, "I mean, he was always close with him."

"I don't know," Henry answered honestly. Yeah, Lucas was close with Will, and after the other night, he would've thought he'd be pretty torn up. But, at the same time, he hadn't seen all that upset this morning. In fact, it had almost felt like he'd been *faking* any grief he displayed, and Henry just didn't know what to make of that one.

"I'd just feel better if he wasn't locked up in his room," Judith continued, and Henry hummed in agreement as he turned his eyes back to the TV. But, the program was ending, and he knew what that meant.

It was four o'clock.

It was time to go.

He'd put it off long enough.

"I'm going to head out in a minute. I probably won't be back for a while," he said, hopping off the couch and rounding up the stairs. He didn't make it fast enough though, and his mother's concerned voice stopped him.

"Where are you going?" She asked. Henry leaned against the railing and considered lying for a brief moment. But, he quickly realized he didn't even have a lie to tell, so he just went with the truth.

"I'm going to hang out with Nancy."

"Nancy Wheeler?" Mr. Sinclair interjected, revealing he actually was listening to what was being said around him. Henry sighed inaudibly as his father put down his paper and the three people sitting in the living room levelled Henry with their curious gazes.

"Yep," he said.

"Well, she's a nice girl," Judith offered, and this time Henry's sigh was much more pronounced as he simply turned and started hopping up the remaining stairs. He knew that once he was out of sight, his parents would exchange looks, and Erica would probably make some comment, but honestly he didn't even care. That used to bother him

like nothing else, but after everything that had happened... He just didn't care.

Instead, he cared very deeply about the room at the end of the hallway.

He shouldn't be doing this.

Henry slipped past the partially closed door, and shut it ever so slightly behind him. Not entirely, that would tip off anyone that came upstairs, but just enough so that no one in the hallway would be able to see the large safe in the corner of the room. The safe that Henry walked up to, trying to tread lightly across the squeaky floorboards, and hesitantly turned the dial.

The first time he chalked it up to nerves.

The second he assumed he'd just messed it up.

The third time was when he began to wonder if maybe he wasn't going to be able to get this stupid thing open.

When the fourth time failed, Henry cursed under his breath, and might've missed the small sound that came from behind him if it weren't for the unsettling silence in his parents' bedroom.

"Um."

Henry whipped around to see the door wide open, and Lucas watching him with an expression that screamed *"I know I shouldn't be seeing this right now."* It was quiet for a moment, the two brothers just looking at each other, before Lucas finally cleared his throat and spoke.

"Erica figured it out so Dad changed it. It's 40-14-18-32 now."

Without a word, Henry turned back to the safe and pulled the door open after one try.

Uncomfortably aware of the way Lucas's eyes followed him, Henry reached into the top compartment of the safe and retrieved what he knew for a fact was there. His father had told him as much when

Henry had tried to crack the code when he was eight.

And all Henry could think about while he felt the heavy weight in his hand was how his father had told him to never, *ever* touch his gun.

He glanced sideways at Lucas, whose eyes were as big as plates, and he it shoved into the back of his waistband. He'd like to think out of sight, out of mind, but the presence of their dad's gun had created a thick, nearly unbreakable tension. Henry reached back into the safe to retrieve the box of ammunition as well, but it wasn't until that was in his jacket pocket that either of them said anything.

"Mom said you were going to the Wheelers," Lucas murmured, his voice much smaller than before.

"Yeah," Henry replied, steeling himself for the questions.

"Can I come?" He asked, Henry unable to conceal the surprise, "Mike and Dustin are there."

"Yeah," Henry said, before shaking his head slightly, trying to get rid of the expression that he knew was making Lucas nervous. Then he smiled and spoke again, "Yeah, of course, Bud."

"Thanks," Lucas said, managing a small smile for Henry.

It was quiet for a moment, the two brothers just looking at each other, and they both came to the same conclusion. Henry led the way with Lucas close on his heels, and they were out of their parents' room and down the stairs in no time. They yelled their goodbyes in voices so normal it was almost remarkable, and they were out the door in less than two minutes. All very impressive when you consider the fact that both of their minds were focused on one, solitary thought:

*I will never tell anyone about this.*

"Hi, Mrs. Wheeler!"

Mrs. Wheeler glanced up from her *Cosmo* and sent a small smile towards the two boys. She was sitting on the couch with a glass of wine in one hand while Mr. Wheeler lounged in the La-Z-Boy,

watching TV. Henry didn't say anything, just waved. The Wheelers had always made him a little uncomfortable.

"Hi, Lucas. The boys are in the basement," Mrs. Wheeler offered.

"Thanks," Lucas said, sending a glance back at Henry before heading off towards the stairs. Henry didn't mind. If anything had been needed to be said, they would've said it in the car.

"Um, Mrs. Wheeler?" Henry said, having to pull her attention away from her magazine again, "Is Nancy here?"

Her eyes widened almost imperceptibly, but Henry didn't say anything about it, just kept on smiling.

"Um, yeah. I think she's out in the garage. The door should be open," she said, sounding a little bewildered. Henry smiled and thanked her before turning on his heel and heading back towards the front door. As he stepped back outside, he could hear Karen Wheeler hiss "*Now Henry Sinclair is picking Nancy up?*" and Ted Wheeler reply with a succinct "*Who?*"

Henry walked around the house and to the driveway, where he found that Mrs. Wheeler had been right; the door was open and Nancy was standing in there. The only thing that she'd neglected to mention was that Nancy wasn't alone.

Because, right next to her was that familiar hair.

Steve Harrington.

For a brief moment, Henry considered just turning back around and booking it to his car. But, they'd already seen him, and he knew that would look a million times more suspicious. So instead, he forced an easygoing smile and continued on his original path into the garage.

Nancy's nervous look did absolutely *nothing* to calm Henry, but he did everything he could to keep that from taking over his expression. The very last thing they needed was for Steve Harrington to know that his girlfriend was going into the woods with Henry Sinclair and Jonathan Byers.

"Hey," Henry started.

"Hey," Nancy replied.

"Hey," Steve finished.

It was silent for five agonizing seconds.

"Um, do you know Henry Sinclair?" Nancy asked, sounding almost desperate as she turned to Steve, who was practically frowning.

"Yeah," he said, not even trying to hide how he sized him up, "How do you two know each other?"

"He's friends with, um..." Nancy cleared her throat and exchanged a look with Henry, "Barb."

Steve's expression dropped immediately.

"Oh," he said simply.

"I was dropping off Lucas," Henry cut in, hoping to get rid of at least some of the smothering awkwardness, "And your mom said you were out here."

"Uh, yeah," Nancy said, really not giving Henry anything to work with here.

"And I was wondering if I could get that review paper?" Henry said, his voice leading on slightly as Nancy looked at him with blank eyes, "The one we talked about at the... you know..."

"The what?" Steve interjected, his voice teetering on the edge of obnoxious. Henry looked away from Nancy to find Steve wearing an expression that was probably meant to be intimidating but just looked kind of funny.

"The funeral..." Henry replied, and that wiped that expression off of Steve's face in a split second.

"Oh," he said simply, again.

Henry cleared his throat awkwardly before he focused back in on Nancy, who now understood the lie that he'd backed them into.

"Yeah, I'll go get it," she said, looking between the two teen boys before she set the baseball bat down against the car and ran inside. Henry wished he could've followed her.

It was quiet for a moment, before it was Steve's turn to clear his throat. He finally picked up the bat and started swinging it around while he walked aimlessly. It was all a little too forced to be the casual "cool guy" routine that Henry knew he was going for.

"So, um, how was that?" He asked, Henry's brow furrowing as he watched the bat flip in circles in Steve's hand.

"How was what?"

"The funeral," Steve said, "How'd—How'd it go? Was it good?"

"Was the funeral good?" Henry repeated slowly, and Steve looked over at him with wide eyes, although the bat still swung around.

"Oh, I meant like—I just—"

"Uh, man—?" Henry started, but it was too late.

The crash of the croquet set falling against the concrete echoed throughout the garage. Steve dropped the bat in shock after it had sent the mallets *loudly* tumbling to the ground, and he looked at the mess for a moment before his eyes snapped over to Henry with a very caught out look on his face.

"Uh," he managed.

He crouched down to start picking up the rack and the mallets; his movements so jerky and rushed that he could never get more than two away until they somehow managed to fall back down. What should've been a quick cleanup job slowly developed into a bigger mess. For a brief moment, Henry considered helping him, god knows he seemed to need it. But, he didn't make any move to, and instead watched as Steve set that *one* mallet back into the rack only for it to fall onto the ground for what must've been the third time.



Thoughts of the emotional past few days and the dangerous plan the three teens had concocted mingled together, and for the first time since this strange turn of events had started, Henry *laughed*.

Steve looked up from where he was still struggling with the croquet set with an affronted expression that he probably thought covered up his own amusement.

"*Laugh it up, Sinclair,*" he said, only succeeding in making Henry laugh harder.

"I am!" He replied in between giggles, and Steve dropped his front; a small smile on his face as he return to the set. He finally managed to get it all back to where it belonged (albeit, significantly more crooked than it was before) and hopped up while a few errant chuckles slipped past Henry's lips.

Before either of them could say anything, Nancy reappeared with a piece of paper and a serious expression that quickly morphed into confusion.

"What happened?" She asked, Henry's cheeks starting to hurt from his smile.

"We're lucky Steve's on the basketball team," he replied, Nancy looking to Steve for an answer but only getting an eye roll in response.

"Well, uh, I have the review paper," Nancy said haltingly, still shooting looks between the two boys as she held out the paper for Henry to take.

"Oh, thanks," he said, having completely forgotten about the lie he'd concocted, "Alright. I, uh, guess I'll see you later."

"Yeah," Nancy agreed with a significant look, and Henry started to walk away from the house, although he felt a little reluctant about it. He reminded himself that he was going to come back around to pick Nancy up once Steve was gone, but that didn't make the feeling go away.

"See you around, Harrington," he offered, choosing not to dwell on it.

"Later, Sinclair," Steve replied, and almost set Henry off again. Not because what he said was particularly funny, but because of the "too cool for school" voice he'd adopted. As if that was going to make Henry forget the image of him scrambling to pick up a croquet set any time soon.

Henry pulled the door to his car open and sat down. He figured he'd drive around for a little bit and hope Nancy had gotten rid of Steve in ten minutes. But, instead of turning his key in the ignition and heading off like he knew he should, Henry leaned his head against the wheel and laughed.

He wouldn't realize until later, but that moment was the lightest he'd felt in days.

## 5. no going back

"I still think we should've told someone. Mrs. Byers, at least."

Henry hummed thoughtfully as he turned down the last street of their drive. Nancy had been apologizing for Steve's presence in the garage for most of the trip, but when Henry told her to forget it, he really meant it. One, because it wasn't her fault—she hadn't know he was going to drop by—and two, because he really didn't think there was anything to apologize for. It had all worked out; when he'd swung back around, she'd been ready to go.

"Yeah, me too," Henry agreed, glancing away from the road to send Nancy a significant look, "But... It's his mom, you know? Not really our place."

"Yeah, I guess," Nancy replied softly, before she straightened in her seat slightly, like an idea had occurred to her, "Hey, when we were talking yesterday about Barb, you asked if my mom had talked to Hopper. Do you know him? Because maybe if you talk to him, he'll —."

The car suddenly jerked to the side of the road and came to a hard stop. For a split second Nancy wondered if they'd swerved to miss hitting something. But, Henry put it in park (with a little more vigor than the gear shift required), and slipped out of the car.

"I don't know Hopper," he said, his voice even, but unlike anything Nancy had ever heard from him before. Henry Sinclair was many things, but emotionless was not one of them.

After a moment of confusion, Nancy got out of the car as well and hurried after Henry since he was already heading out towards the clearing that Jonathan had told them about. It was a quiet walk, Nancy fiddling with the strap on her shoulder and sending sideways glances towards Henry, who didn't once look away from where they were heading. She'd upset him, she could feel it. She just didn't know what she'd done.

A loud boom cut through the silence, and both teens jumped; Nancy

unthinkingly putting her hand on Henry's shoulder. For a moment it was apprehensively quiet, before another one echoed through the forest. But, instead of tensing up again, Henry released that fearful gasp he'd been holding and a small smile worked its way onto his lips.

"Something tells me Jonathan is that way," he said, pointing in the direction of the sound, and even though Nancy still wasn't entirely sure what they'd heard, she found herself relaxing too.

It wasn't until they made it to the field did she realize, and she watched with growing amusement as none of Jonathan's shots found their mark.

"You're supposed to hit the cans, right?" She called, maybe a little proud that comment got Henry to chuckle and coaxed a small smile from Jonathan.

"No, actually, you see the spaces in between the cans?" Jonathan said as they neared him, "I'm aiming for those."

"You're a regular sharpshooter," Henry replied, Jonathan huffing out a small laugh.

"Either of you shot a gun before?" He asked, Nancy sending him a look.

"Have you met my parents?" She asked, before her attention was drawn to what Henry pulled out of his waistband.

"A few times, with my dad. It's been a couple of years now, though," he offered, grabbing the box of ammo out of his pocket and beginning to load the gun with an ease similar to the one he had when he tinkered inside his car. It was all mechanics, in the end.

"Yeah, I haven't shot one since I was ten," Jonathan said, reloading his gun a lot less elegantly than Henry, "My dad took me hunting on my birthday. He made me kill a rabbit."

"A rabbit?" Nancy said as Henry sent a startled glance Jonathan's way. While he wouldn't put it past Lonnie Byers to make his son kill something, he couldn't imagine Jonathan *doing* it. Not even now as a

teenager, let alone as a child.

"Yeah," Jonathan said, the look on his face letting Henry know that he was spot on about his temperament, "I guess he thought it would make me into more of a man or something. I cried for a week."

"Jesus," Nancy whispered, Henry humming softly in agreement.

"What, I'm a fan of Thumper," Jonathan said, misreading their reactions and going on the defensive. Something that Henry had begun to suspect was an integral part of his personality.

"Your *dad*," Henry clarified, Jonathan sending him an incredulous look, "That's messed up."

"*Your* dad didn't make you shoot anything?" He asked, and if it were anyone else, Henry's hackles would've gone up and he'd say something with an edge to it. But, it wasn't anyone else, it was Jonathan Byers. And instead of feeling defensive, he just felt... *sad*.

"We would go to a range, I just shot targets," Henry replied, his voice strong but his eyes dropping to the gun in his hand, "My dad was in Vietnam, he wouldn't... He doesn't want me to ever *have* to shoot anything."

It was quiet for a moment and Henry returned to loading his father's gun. He should tell him—*something* sometime soon. Let him know that he appreciates him. That he's doing a good job.

It was easy to forget how good he had it with his parents. His dad would never make him shoot a rabbit, hell, Henry had had to *beg* him to let him try at the range. Then his dad had *drilled* gun safety into him, had made *sure* Henry wouldn't hurt himself or anyone else.

He'd let him shoot it because he wanted his son to be happy, but had taught him how because he knew it was his job to keep his son safe.

Yeah, he was a pretty good dad. Better than most. And the things he wasn't getting right, well... it's not like Henry was giving him much of a chance. He didn't know.

But, he never would.

"I guess my mom and dad loved each other at some point, but..." Jonathan said, calling Henry's attention back to the present, although he obviously wasn't the only one caught in thoughts about his home life, "I wasn't around for that part."

Nancy held her hand out and after a moment of surprise, Jonathan passed his gun to her.

"Uh, just point and shoot," he offered, Henry snorting and leaning in until he was almost cheek-to-cheek with Nancy. Both of them were too focused on the positioning of the gun to notice how Jonathan looked between them and then dropped his eyes to his shoes.

"Hold it like this," Henry murmured, readjusting her hands ever so slightly, but without hesitation, "And look down the sight."

Henry took a step back and admired how Nancy had taken to aiming a gun immediately. He remembered his dad having to critique twenty different things before he'd been good to go. And sure, maybe he wasn't noticing anything wrong with Nancy because he hadn't shot one in ages, but she *looked* right.

"I don't think my parents ever loved each other," Nancy offered, still lining up the can.

"They must've married for some reason," Jonathan said and, without meaning to, set off those dark thoughts that plagued Henry at night.

He knew that wasn't this situation, he *knew* it, but his brain would take the smallest opening and send him spiraling.

"My mom was young. My dad was older, but he had a cushy job, money, came from a good family. So they bought a nice house at the end of the cul-de-sac, and started their nuclear family," Nancy said, not knowing how she was causing Henry's throat to tighten with each word. How her description danced terribly close the fears that were always at the back of his mind.

"Screw that," Jonathan said.

"Yeah," Nancy replied, "Screw that."

She pulled the trigger, the can went flying off the stump, and something in Henry released. Maybe it was the loud sound that broke his stream of consciousness, or maybe it was hearing the soft bitterness in the other teens' voices, but his anxiety was suddenly gone. It was weird. Not even a cigarette got rid of it that quickly.

Rather than dwelling on that thought, he clapped Nancy on the shoulder and smiled at her. She was proud of herself, and he didn't blame her; first try was impressive. But, there were still a few cans on stumps, and he supposed he should take a turn.

Although he was rusty, the lessons his dad taught him at the range had stuck with him. A few breathless moments passed, and his shot found its mark.

He lowered the gun with a satisfied smile, before he turned and saw how Jonathan and Nancy were both looking at him. His expression morphed into something lighter. Playful.

"Don't look at me, my parents love each other very much."

The three teens trekked through the woods without much of a destination in mind, just trying to stay within the mile radius that Jonathan had mapped out. Thankfully, Indiana weather hadn't drifted into cold territory yet, and all they needed were jackets. Henry didn't know if he'd be able to handle walking around like this if the temperature had dropped like it usually did in November.

Honestly, it was sort of nice. Like a nature hike. If it weren't for the guns and whatever it was they were hunting.

"You never said what I was saying," Nancy said, breaking the comfortable silence with words directed towards Jonathan, "Yesterday, you said I was saying something and that's why you took my picture."

"Oh, uh," Jonathan said awkwardly, "I don't know..."

A soft, but involuntary sigh left Henry's lips. He didn't think the other two heard it, but it had caught him by surprise. He wasn't entirely sure where it had come from.

"My guess..." Jonathan started, and Henry found himself wishing he just left it at the lie about not knowing, "I saw this girl, you know, trying to be someone else. But, for that moment... It was like you were alone, or you thought you were. And, you know, you could just be yourself."

He was suddenly reminded of when he tried to do homework but Lucas kept interrupting him to talk about a new comic or something. Lucas didn't mean any harm, but it still bothered him a little. Why it was happening right now, he didn't quite know.

"That is such bullshit."

Although he knew Jonathan's reaction to that was probably a little funny, Henry didn't get to see it because at some point his even pace had pulled him a few steps ahead of the other two. Probably around the time they slowed down to have this conversation.

There it was again, that feeling. It was a little hotter this time, at the bottom of his stomach.

"What?" Jonathan stammered, and Henry didn't need to turn around to know that they'd stopped in their tracks.

"I am not trying to be someone else," Nancy said, Henry slowing but not stopping. It was spreading now; the heat in his stomach had reached his chest, "Just because I'm dating Steve and you don't like him—."

"You know what? Forget it. I just thought it was a good picture," Jonathan snapped back, Henry able to hear the telltale crunch of leaves, although neither one caught up with him.

"He's actually a good guy," Nancy said, Henry's mind flashing to the croquet set and the feelings subsiding, although it was only for a moment, "The other day, with the camera... He's not like that at all. He was just being protective."

"*Do you blame him?*" Henry thought grimly, before he recognized they'd stopped again and the fire returned to taking him over. Slowly. Inch by inch.



"Yeah, that's one word for it," Jonathan muttered bitterly, and Henry rolled his eyes. He knew his camera was important to him and that the Byers weren't the most affluent, but *come on, man*.

"Oh, I guess what you did was okay," Nancy replied, voicing Henry's internal monologue.

"No, I never said that," Jonathan said, sounding like he was back in his usual defensive stance. Although this time was probably for a better reason than imagined slights.

"He had every right to be pissed—."

"Okay, alright, does that mean I have to like him?" Once again, the two teens behind Henry had come to a stop. He would be making a lot of time on them right now, if it weren't for the leaden heat weighing him down; keeping him from moving much at all. A part of him idly wondered if they somehow managed to forget he was here.

"Listen, don't take it personally, okay? I don't like most people. He's in the vast majority," Jonathan hissed out, and Henry rolled his eyes again. Sure, sometimes Jonathan could be okay, nice even, but this version of him—the nihilistic douchebag—Henry didn't care for.

"You know, I was actually starting to think that you were okay," Nancy said, almost sounding a tiny bit hurt. Henry found himself rolling his eyes for the third time in thirty seconds.

"Yeah?" Jonathan challenged.

"Yeah. Yeah, I was thinking 'Jonathan Byers, maybe he's not the pretentious creep everyone says he is,'" Nancy said, but Henry barely heard her.

Because, there it was.

The heat had reached the base of his throat.

It wasn't stopping.

"Well, I was just starting to think *you* were okay," Jonathan replied, not knowing how his words coaxed the fire in Henry higher and

higher; right to the top, "I was thinking 'Nancy Wheeler, she's not just another suburban girl who thinks she's rebelling by doing exactly what every other suburban girl does. Until that phase passes and they marry some boring one-time jock who now works sales, and they live out a perfectly boring little life at the end of a cul-de—."

*"WOULD BOTH OF YOU SHUT UP?!"*

Jonathan and Nancy jumped, both startled, but Henry didn't care. It was too late for that. Maybe if they'd looked at him with those alarmed doe eyes earlier, it would've abated. But, it was out now, and there was no putting it back in.

*"God!"* He exclaimed, looking between the two of them with frustration and accusation and *anger*. Nothing outweighed the *anger*, "Are you two really having this stupid, petty argument?! *Right now?! Because, you know, personally, I'm more worried about finding the missing kid and my best friend!*"

Nancy and Jonathan both looked like they'd been slapped, but Henry still couldn't bring himself to care. He couldn't remember the last time he'd yelled like that, he wasn't sure he ever really *had*. Maybe in private, maybe as catharsis when no one else could hear, but not *at* someone. He wasn't the type, and he'd never really had a reason to—at least a reason that he could act on. But, he'd done it now, and there was no undoing it. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to.

Henry swung around and turned his back on the other two, fully intending to continue walking, before he heard Nancy scoff behind him.

"So, *that's* how you refer to her?" She said, the accusation in her voice making Henry's jaw clench, "Interesting. I'll keep that in mind. Don't know why I'm surprised, since you wouldn't go to Steve's with her."

Henry turned to face her with a harsh glare, one he'd never levelled on Nancy before. Again, maybe not on anyone. He never let his emotions be this visible, but now that he'd started, he couldn't stop.

To Nancy's credit, she only hesitated for a second before she returned it with her own.

"She didn't want me there," Henry said, Nancy scoffing again.

"*Bullshit*," she spat, "Barb *really* likes you, okay? And she's my best friend, so I'm not going to let you string her along or *whatever* it is you're doing."

A tight and bitter laugh rang through the forest, one that was so full of acid that Jonathan winced.

"*Typical!*" Henry announced, with a mockery of a smile on his face, "Typical, typical, *typical!* Such typical—."

He caught the words right before they escaped.

Immediately, even his sneer slipped away and all that was left was a stone cold glare. He turned around and started walking again; angry at himself for almost letting that out, and angry at Nancy for pushing him to that point.

That had been close, *way too close*.

"Oh, okay, sure, shut down and storm off like every other time you get upset," Nancy yelled at his back, "Which can be at any little thing apparently! Hell, bring up Hopper watch you stomp away!"

Henry came to a sudden stop and swallowed hard. It wasn't Nancy's harsh words that had frozen him, though. It was what followed: Jonathan's soft, but appalled "*Nancy*."

He shouldn't be surprised. He really shouldn't. But, after the way Nancy had spoken about him earlier, he'd hoped that maybe both of them didn't know. That maybe he would get lucky.

He hadn't.

Henry turned to see Nancy's confusion, and how Jonathan said nothing to clear it up. Instead, he just looked at Henry cautiously, like he wasn't sure how he was going to respond. Like he was nervous that he'd turn the fire he'd focused on Nancy onto him. What he got instead though, was a shrug.

"Don't let me stop you, Jonathan," Henry said, fake flippancy not

even beginning to cover the bitterness in his voice, "It never stopped anyone else in Hawkins from talking."

Jonathan looked at him warily for one more second, maybe trying to gauge if he was setting him up for a trap, before he turned to Nancy. He didn't stop glancing at Henry as he spoke, though; treading very lightly.

"Hopper was the one who pulled Henry out of the Quarry."

"What?" Nancy said, more lost than ever as she looked between Henry and Jonathan.

"Yeah, I was, uh, *really lucky* he happened to be there," Henry said, sounding like he didn't think he was lucky at all, "Even did CPR for the twenty minutes it took for the ambulance to arrive. My mom makes him a pie every Christmas. She used to make me take it to him, but now she just does it herself."

"I don't understand..." Nancy said softly, all of the fire in her voice gone.

"Yeah, well, you don't have to," Henry snapped, but it was hard to keep it up now. That moment had passed, and there was only what was left. He felt tired, like he'd just ran a marathon or something. Finally, Henry sighed.

"Can we just... Can we just go find this thing? Please?" He asked, and after a moment, Jonathan and Nancy both nodded. They were still for a few seconds longer before they started to walk again.

This time, the silence wasn't so comfortable.

They hadn't recovered from that, not even once the sun had gone down. They just continued to hike through the dark woods in silence. They stuck close together though, but that was just because all of them were nervous. About getting split up, and about what they'd come here for.

Henry kept running his nail back and forth over a ridge on his flashlight. It was the best he could do for a nervous tic right now; it wasn't a great time to pull out a cigarette.

After hours of walking, Nancy stopped and brought both boys' attentions to her

"What, are you tired?" Jonathan's taut tone revealing that he had not gotten over what Nancy had said earlier. Henry was closer to her though, and from one look at her expression he could tell that this was a lot more than fatigue.

"What is it?" He asked, Nancy glancing at him before looking off into the darkness.

"I heard something."

Nancy sent them a nervous look before heading towards it, with Jonathan and Henry following soon after.

Fortunately or unfortunately, it wasn't what they were looking for. It was a deer. Henry felt his stomach drop as he realized what they'd heard was its pained whimpers, and he took in its bloody body with increasing nausea. God, how could anyone go out of their way to kill these things?

"It's been hit by a car," Nancy said, her voice a reflection of the feelings coursing through Henry, "We can't just leave it."

Nancy looked down at the gun in her hand, raising it slightly despite the tears in her eyes, but before she could even truly aim it, Jonathan held his hand out.

"I'll do it," he said, and his jaw clenched at the looks he got in response, "I'm not nine anymore."

And while that hinted at a whole boatload of issues, Henry was mostly just happy this didn't fall to him.

The three of them stood up—looking down at the suffering animal with heartbroken eyes—and Jonathan pointed the gun at the deer. A moment passed, and then two, and even though he'd just celebrated not having to be the one to do it, Henry heard himself saying "*Jonathan, I can—*."

"No," Jonathan cut him off, his voice shaky, "I can do this."

Jonathan took a deep breath, the kind you take right before you do something you really don't want to, and Henry anticipated the sound of the shot. Only, it never came. Because the deer was *gone*.

The three of them stumbled back, none of them comprehending what had just happened. It took a moment for any of them to start moving again, and then they only crept forward slightly; staying close to each other as they followed the blood smears on the leaves.

"Do you guys see any more?" Henry asked, taking the silence as a no.

"Henry?" Nancy said softly, pulling his attention away from a funny shaped stick that had startled him and to where her flashlight shined, "What... What is that?"

Henry frowned, looking at a hole in a tree trunk, filled with somethings stringy and *wet*.

"I don't know," he replied, moving forward a little, but not too much. Something told him not to get too close to this thing. He turned to get Jonathan's opinion, but he wasn't there. He must've wandered off in some other direction.

Nancy and Henry kneeled down to try to get a better look so they could figure out just what they were looking at.

Blood.

There was blood on the bottom in there, just like there'd been blood on the leaves out here. Which meant that the deer...

"It can't be...?" Henry started, looking over to share a baffled look with Nancy. Was it *in* the tree? Was that a type of predator or something? One that stuffs its meals in trees?

"Jonathan?!" Nancy called out, but when no reply came, she turned back to the gash. For a moment, both of them just looked at it, before the sound of something hitting the ground cut through the silence.

She had dropped her bag.

"Nancy..." Henry started, but it was too late, she was crawling

forward into the hole, "*Nancy!*"

She didn't listen to him and kept going, much farther than she should've been able to. The tree was big, but not *that* big.

For a moment, Henry was still. He didn't want to. He *really* didn't want to.

He swore and followed her.

Being inside of this thing was a million times grosser than looking at it, and that had been pretty bad. He pushed through the dripping strings of god knows what until he ended up on the other side of the tree.

Or at least, what *should've* been the other side of the tree. But, it couldn't be.

With the exception of Nancy, this place was *all wrong*.

It was hazy, and the air was heavy and thick with something that made it hurt when he breathed. Some particles floated around them, almost like snow, but they seemed suspended in place. Like they were caught in whatever gas or smoke that surrounded them. And the trees—which had been a little intimidating at night, but lovely the rest of the time—were now knotted monstrosities looming over them.

"What...?" Nancy started, not even able to finish her question. Henry didn't know what to say either. What *happened*?

Henry stepped forward, even though he kind of wanted to crawl right back through that hole. This felt wrong. It felt like they shouldn't be here.

But, he didn't say that, and just followed Nancy. No matter how bad this place made him feel, no matter how his flashlight flickered, he couldn't just leave without her. If he could power through this, he could probably push himself through anything. It couldn't get much worse.

And yet it did.

Because Nancy turned her flashlight and there it was.

She didn't need to tell him what it was, because Henry realized immediately. There was no other option. It was what Nancy had seen in the woods behind Steve's house, what Mrs. Byers had seen in her house.

And it was eating the deer.

They both froze when they saw it, but they also knew instinctively that they needed to leave *now*. After a moment of shocked horror, they began to walk backwards, not taking their eyes off of the thing tearing into the deer with a disgusting fervor. Slowly, slowly they moved away. But, it wouldn't matter, because Nancy's shoe would still find that twig, and that snap would still alert the creature that they were there.

What had been called a "man with no face" twisted towards them, and Henry was suddenly struck by the fact that it had *far too much face*.

He screamed, Henry would admit it, but so did Nancy before they both took off.

For a moment, all they did was run, trying to put as much distance as they could between themselves and that thing. Henry didn't know what it would do if it caught them, but he had to imagine they'd end up similar to that deer.

That thought alone caused his breath to shorten, which was bad when you were running. Before he could collapse though, they heard a familiar voice, sounding close but *strange*.

"Nancy?!" Jonathan's voice echoed, "*Henry?!*"

"Jonathan!" Henry called, hoping to catch sight of him even though he knew he wouldn't be much more help against this thing.

"Where are you?!" Nancy yelled.

"I'm right here!" They heard in response, but no matter where they turned, they didn't see him.



"Jonathan!" Nancy cried out again, but Henry didn't echo it, because in his search for Jonathan, he had found something else.

"Nancy," he said, catching her attention before he pointed out the familiar gash in a tree. He didn't understand what they'd done, or where they were, but maybe if that's how they'd *gotten* here...

Clearly, Nancy agreed, because she dashed towards it with Henry on her heels. She got down on her knees before sending a nervous look back towards Henry, which he appreciated the sentiment of—he didn't want to be alone here either, not even for a second—but disliked how it wasted time.

"Go," he insisted, Nancy nodding slightly before she crawled forward and out of sight. Henry followed soon after, but it quickly became clear that either this was a different tree, or something had changed.

It was *hard* this time, those disgusting strings were getting in the way, there was a film of some weird substance that didn't give easily, and the space felt smaller. It was like the tree was re-growing or something. But, that didn't make any sense. Then again, *none* of this did.

Henry continued forward, knowing he must be getting close, but when he struck a hand out towards what he assumed to be the other side, a sheet of thick goo didn't give. It stayed taut and unbroken, no matter how he pushed. He was right there, he could feel it, but he couldn't get through. And, was it just the claustrophobia, or was it getting *smaller* in here?

Oh, god. He was stuck.

This thing was going to close up around him and he was going to suffocate inside of a *tree*. Or, worse, he was going to get spit back out on the other side, and he'd be stuck in that awful place with that *thing*.

Oh, god. He was going to die.

Henry pushed as hard as he could, but it just wouldn't give. He was so, so close to being through it. His fingers were nearly pushing it to

its breaking point, but he couldn't do it. He wasn't strong enough. *He couldn't do it.*

Something wrapped tightly around his hand through the film and *pulled.*

He wasn't strong enough to do it.

*Not alone.*

He was through, and it didn't hurt to breathe, and the trees looked nice, and there was nothing floating in the air around him. But, most important of all, there were Jonathan and Nancy, with their hands still around his; looking like they'd been just as scared as he'd been.

Nancy surged forward with Jonathan following only a second later, and Henry found himself in an embrace so tight it hurt. He didn't care. He returned it just as hard.

None of them said anything; they just regained their breath and reassured themselves that they were here.

They were safe.

At least, for now.

The hot water beating down on him should've relaxed his muscles, but he suspected that there was nothing on the planet that could do that right now.

He'd been hesitant to get into the Wheeler's shower; he really didn't want anyone other than Nancy to know he was here. But, he had to wash himself and he wasn't going home tonight. After being in that *place*—he reached forward and turned up the water temperature to something uncomfortable— he couldn't be alone.

He tried to push those thoughts away, the images of that *thing* tearing into the deer, but they kept forcing their way back. Eyes open or closed, it was all he could see.

Once he had scrubbed himself to the point of discomfort, Henry turned off the shower and stepped out. Ted Wheeler was a smaller

man than him, both in height and build, but he much preferred wearing snug pajamas to what he'd had on earlier. He might burn those.

He slipped out of the bathroom and managed to make it back to Nancy's room without getting caught; sighing in the slightest amount of relief when he shut and locked her door behind him.

"You good?" Jonathan asked, Henry shrugging slightly. He didn't think he could really lie about that right now, "You can have this sleeping bag, I'll just—."

"Can you two just come over here, please?" Nancy cut in, the desperation in her voice so similar to what Henry felt right now. He understood, he might've even suggested it.

Getting into Nancy Wheeler's bed wasn't exactly where Henry had expected his life to take him. But, right now, it made more sense than most of the things happening around him.

Neither of the boys got under the covers, Jonathan laid right on top of them while Henry was on the sheets because Nancy had that corner of the duvet tucked under chin. It was a tight squeeze; it would've been even if they'd all been shaped like Nancy. But, both boys were broad shouldered—even if Jonathan didn't seem like it from how often he slouched—and there was barely enough room for the three of them. They were all pressed against each other one way or another, and there was no readjusting without upsetting someone else. But even so, it almost wasn't weird. If it had just been Nancy and Henry, the two people who went *there*, it wouldn't have been. But, Jonathan was uncomfortable and it was coming off of him in waves.

"Do you want the lights off or—."

"On," Nancy and Henry replied at the exact same time. Jonathan softly agreed and it was quiet.

It was quiet for a very long time.

Henry knew because he didn't fall asleep. He couldn't. Hours passed

and he stared at Nancy Wheeler's ceiling, unable to shake what had happened tonight.

He'd almost died.

He knew it, he just *did*. If he and Nancy hadn't been fast enough, or if that tree had closed up a little sooner, then that thing would've killed him. Or worse, he would've been stuck in that place, running for his life.

Henry had spent a lot of time thinking about what Hell was like. Getting himself ready. But, nothing could've prepared him for that place.

And that's where Barb and Will were.

He felt like throwing up. Thinking about his best friend and the sweet kid that cried at *The Return of the Jedi* in that place made his stomach twist into knots. They must be so scared... Or, they were until that thing—.

Henry might actually be sick.

They could be dead. They could've died there. *He* could've died there. He still could. Who knows, maybe that thing will come into this room tonight and drag him out of bed, back to that terrible place, and he would die scared. He'd die alone. He'd die—.

He'd die with only Lucas to remember him.

The *real* him.

"Nancy?" Henry's voice broke, even though it was quiet, but he didn't care. He needed to talk to her. The pressure coming from inside was too much, and he felt like he would shatter into a million pieces if he didn't let it out.

"Yeah?" Nancy said, confirming his suspicions that she couldn't sleep either. He would've been surprised if she'd managed to after tonight.

"Is Jonathan awake?" He asked, hearing Nancy turn slightly to check.

"I don't think so," she whispered, softer now.

"I need to tell you something," Henry said, his voice coming out more desperate than he wanted. But, he couldn't stop himself; this had to happen, one way or another.

"Okay?" Nancy said, accepting of whatever it was. Henry could feel heat start to build behind his eyes.

"You know how earlier, you said you wouldn't let me 'string Barb along' or something?" He asked, Nancy sighing.

"Henry, I—."

"No, no, just. Let me finish," He cut off her apology and took a deep breath, trying to bring himself back under control. It didn't work, "It wasn't like that between us. It never was. It never *could* be. We both knew that."

"Okay?" She said, sounding more confused now, but open. Like she was willing to listen to whatever it was he had to say.

God, Henry was going to cry.

"Nancy..." he said softly, the words stuck in his throat. He sniffed a little too loud.

"Henry," Nancy turned over, concern in her voice and likely on her face if he could bring himself to look at her. Instead, he focused on the words he couldn't say, the ones that were right there but just wouldn't come. The fear that gripped him whenever he even *thought* about telling someone had him in a chokehold now, but he was certain he would break if he didn't get this out.

Then, there was Nancy's voice, so soft, and so kind, it *hurt*, "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

"I'm gay."

A rush of words, said so quickly that they couldn't quite sink in right away. But, they were said. They were out, and the ungodly pressure inside of him lessened. It wasn't completely gone, but it was

manageable. All because he'd said two little words.

Henry couldn't remember the last time he'd admitted it out loud.

Maybe that was for good reason, because the room was silent. Just their breathing, nothing else.

He didn't know what reaction he'd been expecting from her, but a moment of shock made sense. He'd be pretty surprised too. In a town like Hawkins, being like him meant a lot more than liking boys. It meant acting a certain way, talking a certain way. Henry hadn't ever been those ways, some just because he wasn't, and others because he'd forced himself not to be. Nancy being shocked was a good sign honestly, it meant he was keeping it hidden.

He wondered if she'd kick him out.

Out of the bed, at the very least. It was almost ironic, that she'd probably prefer to share a bed with a guy who was interested in sex with her over a guy who'd never, under any circumstances, want to touch her like that. But, at the same time, he understood the logic. Nobody wants to share a bed with a dirty queer.

She might kick him out of the house. That wouldn't surprise him either. It would hurt, and since he'd left his car at the woods, he'd have to walk home, so he'd be terrified. But, he wouldn't be surprised.

He didn't think she'd tell anyone. Nancy didn't seem like the type. But, who knows, maybe he'd found a soft spot, and she'd tell everyone that Henry Sinclair was a... But, she'd have to explain why he told her, and why he was in her bed, so he doubted she would, even if she wanted to.

Nancy readjusted and Henry's breath caught in his throat. He didn't realize how scared he was until that moment, it was like having just a little of the damned weight gone had distracted him from the primal fear twisting in his gut.

But, in that moment, there was nothing to be scared of. She was just pulling as much of the duvet as she could out from under Jonathan's

sleeping form. Miraculously, he didn't wake up, but Henry didn't have time to really process that, because Nancy was covering him with the blanket. The same one that she was under.

Henry frowned and blinked a few times, before he rolled over to face her. He suddenly wished the lights were off, because this was too much. He couldn't do eye contact right now; he couldn't look directly at that gentle expression. He couldn't handle that.

Henry looked down to the bedspread and rubbed his nose. After a moment of studying the floral sheets, he saw how Nancy raised her hand out of the corner of his eye, and he couldn't help it, even though he tried—he flinched. Just a little, he barely moved, but Nancy noticed and paused. It didn't stop her though. After a moment, she placed her hand on his face and gently rubbed circles on his cheek with her thumb.

Henry looked up and made eye contact again, and for a moment the two teens looked at each other. Neither one said anything, they didn't need to, and Henry found himself breaking the number one rule of how to keep people from finding out the truth. But, he supposed it didn't matter now. Nancy knew. She hadn't kicked him out for being gay. She wouldn't kick him out for crying in front of her.

Henry's body shook with the first of what would likely be many sobs, but that didn't stop him from noticing the sniffs coming from the girl next to him. Maybe it was sympathy, or maybe her own emotional overload, or both, but the result was the same. Nancy was crying too.

The hand on his cheek disappeared, but it was so she could wrap her arms around his neck. He should've hesitated, worried that it would be taken the wrong way or that she wouldn't want someone like him to touch her, but Henry found himself wrapping his arms around Nancy's waist and pulling her closer without even thinking about it. Nancy didn't mind, just buried her face in his shoulder, which Henry mirrored.

It was quiet except for the muffled sounds of their tears. There was no going back from this, from any of this, and maybe that was part of the reason they were crying. Because even if they found Barb and Will, there was no undoing what they'd seen, and what they'd gone

through. Just like how there would be no undoing the pain Henry had experienced ever since the day he realized how he felt when he looked at boys.

But, there was no going back from this moment, either. Two teens that had barely known each other a week ago had just been through the impossible, and the *painful*. But, here they were. Henry had bared the part of him he'd kept hidden from everyone but his brother and the girl who was just like him, to someone he barely knew. He'd trusted her with his life in the woods, and now he was trusting her with the truth. The latter had been the bigger gamble. But, it had paid off, because instead of every terrible scenario Henry could imagine, Nancy had just pulled him close. There was no undoing that.

He was sobbing, but Henry felt much better than he had before.



## 6. should i stay or should i go

Henry didn't remember falling asleep.

He didn't remember much of anything really. When he opened his eyes that morning, the first thing he really registered was *confusion*. Because this wasn't his bed, or his room, and the warmth against his body *certainly* wasn't coming from one of his siblings who crawled under the covers with him after a nightmare.

No matter how close he was with Erica and Lucas, they really weren't the type to cuddle.

After a few moments of racking his sleepy brain for answers, he finally managed to get himself to just look around, and the shot of adrenaline he got when he realized where he was woke him up better than any cup of coffee ever could.

Oh, *god*, had he hooked up with Nancy Wheeler last night?

If he was anyone else, that would make the most sense. It explained why he was in her room, why she was running her fingers over the back of his neck, and why he'd been sleeping with his head in her lap. And, even though it *was* him, there was a split second where he wondered if he'd gotten *really* drunk and decided to see what all the fuss was about.

Fortunately, no matter how few hours his brain was running on, it was able to put that particular fear to rest. No, he had not slept with Nancy Wheeler last night. Well, *literally* he had, but he hadn't had sex with her. One, because that wasn't something he would ever do in his entire life, no matter how blasted he was. Two, he was starting to remember just how he ended up here.

*Unfortunately.*

It was all coming flooding back to him: the funeral, the target practice, the woods, that *place*, that *thing*, and—.

*Oh, god.*

He'd told.

He'd *told*.

"Oh, you're awake."

Nancy's soothing voice offered a great contrast to the whirlwind raging in Henry's mind, but did very little to calm it. Because no matter how gentle her voice was, or how nice feeling the weight of her hand on the back of his neck was, or how warm it was to lie against her, he'd *told*. He'd done the one thing he swore to never do. The one thing he knew could destroy his entire life.

But...

But, her voice *was* gentle, and her hand *was* resting on the back of his neck, and his head *was* cushioned on her lap.

He'd told, but he was still here.

Why was he still here?

Oh, yeah.

Now he remembered.

That explained it.

Explained Nancy's kindness and her physical affection. Explained his dehydration too.

That fear was slipping away now, the adrenaline was starting to wear off, and it was all being replaced with a strong feeling of discomfort. He honestly didn't know what to do now. He'd spilled his guts, she'd accepted it, they'd both cried.

He never thought he'd get this far.

Finally, he settled on sitting up. That seemed like a good first step. He stretched a little and readjusted on the bed for a moment before turning his attention back to Nancy.

It was quiet as Henry searched for something to say. *"Thanks for being cool with me being gay, and sharing your bed, and crying."* Yeah, no. For one, that was the most pathetic thing he'd ever even *thought* about saying. Also, it'd been hard enough to spit out those words at night after a traumatic event. The morning after, without his emotions riding so high... His stomach twisted in embarrassment when he thought back to what he'd said and how he'd acted. He didn't want to take it back, not exactly, he just wished he could change what happened a little. Change how he'd acted.

He was nowhere near having something to say and it had been quiet for way too long. Of course, he considered, he wasn't the only one in this not-conversation. Nancy could start. And just as suddenly as that thought occurred to him did he realize that she might be just as unsure as he was. He'd never come out to a girl he barely knew and then cried in bed with her all night, but he really doubted Nancy had ever had someone come out to her, let alone the whole crying and bed sharing thing.

Nancy was finally the one to move past it. But, not with words, just with a small smile. Henry didn't try to return it, because now that he was looking at her—*really* looking at her—he noticed just how tired she looked.

"Did you get any sleep last night?" He asked, Nancy's attempt at a pleasant expression disappearing.

"Every time I shut my eyes I saw..." Nancy cut herself off and swallowed hard, and Henry reached out to take her hand in his. This time, he was the one to smile faintly, but it was enough. For now.

It was quiet between the two of them for a moment, but before either could break that silence, Henry was reminded that there was someone else in this bed when Jonathan's sleepy face lifted out of the pillow.

"What're you doing?" Jonathan said, his voice gritty with sleep, and Henry noticed for the first time that Nancy was holding a book in her other hand. Not a fun one she could be distracting herself with, though; a school book.

"Oh, I was..." She took a deep breath before steeling herself, "That place. I think—It was eating there, I think it *lives* there."

"They suit each other," Henry said, his voice coming out more bitter than he'd prefer.

"But... Will and Barb..." Nancy's voice came out small, and Henry felt his throat constrict at that. Their hands tightened around one another's without either consciously thinking about it.

"My mom said she talked to Will." Jonathan's voice cut through both of their anxieties, "If he's alive, there's a chance Barbara is too."

"That means they're trapped..." Nancy whispered, Henry removing his hand from hers to wrap it around her waist; he was finding it easier to be physically affectionate now. He wasn't going to dwell on which event had brought that about.

"We came back," Henry finally said, pulling Nancy's and Jonathan's attention to him, "Maybe they can too."

"You want to go out there again?" Jonathan asked incredulously, and Henry's eyes dropped to the bedspread. Because the answer was a big fat *no*, but... he couldn't bring himself to say that. He didn't even want to admit how utterly terrified he was just thinking about going to that place. He didn't want Nancy and Jonathan to *know* that he was a coward.

"Maybe we don't have to," Nancy said softly, "When we saw it, it was eating a deer. Meaning it's a predator, right?"

"I mean, I guess?" Henry offered, unwilling to commit to *anything* when it came to this creature.

"And it seems to hunt at night like a lion or a coyote," Nancy continued, gesturing towards the book, "But, it doesn't hunt in packs like them. It's always alone, like a bear. And at Steve's, Barb cut herself. And then, last night, the deer was bleeding too."

"It can smell—or-or *sense* blood." Henry murmured, mulling over the pieces of the animal kingdom that came together to create this *thing*, "Like a shark."

"Theoretically," Nancy agreed softly.

"But, that means we could test it," Jonathan pointed out, the weight his words held not dawning on him until he said them. The three teenagers exchanged wide eyed looks, each of them wondering if the other two were actually considering this idea.

"We'll need to be ready," Nancy finally said, breaking the silence with a certainty Henry didn't feel. But, even so, he nodded just like Jonathan.

Nancy's doorknob rattled and broke the three of them out their thoughts; all of them jumping before they realized that the door was locked.

"Honey, are you up?" Mrs. Wheeler called from the hall.

"Yeah, I'm... I'm getting dressed," Nancy replied, her voice breathless from the surprise,

"I, uh," Mrs. Wheeler hesitated, like she truly didn't know how to speak to her, "Made some blueberry pancakes."

"I'll be down in a second."

They listened as Mrs. Wheeler's steps faded and Henry watched as Jonathan and Nancy pulled their hands apart, but didn't comment on it.

"Your mom doesn't knock?" Jonathan finally said, with a tinge of amusement that rarely made an appearance. Henry's lips curled upwards, even though it really wasn't that funny, and Nancy chuckled too. Maybe it wasn't really about what he'd said, maybe they all just needed a reason to smile.

"I need to go home."

Nancy and Jonathan looked over at him with horrified surprise on their faces. He only realized after the fact how those words must sound.

"For like, half an hour," he added, watching as both of their shoulders

dropped and they breathed a sigh of relief, "I need to change. And... my parents, I..." It was Henry's turn to sigh, only this time it wasn't relief that fueled it, "Also, I need to go get my car."

"I'll get it."

Henry and Nancy looked over, becoming the two unable to hide their surprise, and Jonathan just shrugged as he pulled on his jacket.

"I'll drive you to your house, then I'll get it," he said, managing a small smile, "We're going to need a reliable car and yours probably runs better than mine."

Henry hummed doubtfully, drawing soft chuckles from the other two teens.

"I can help," Nancy piped up, "I can drive the other car or—."

"No, you stay here," Jonathan interrupted, Henry frowning but not commenting on the hint of urgency in his tone, "Eat breakfast, it's better if your parents think nothing's wrong."

Nancy looked over to Henry for confirmation. He just shrugged in response. If Jonathan felt the sudden urge to step up and take charge, he wasn't going to fight it.

"Okay, sure," she finally said, softer than before, "Just... don't be gone too long. I don't..."

The boys exchanged a knowing look before Henry reached out and placed his hand on Nancy's shoulder.

"We'll be back before you know it," he promised softly, Nancy looking up at him through her lashes before she nodded, "Enjoy those blueberry pancakes."

Nancy scoffed and shrugged his hand off before the pair giggled. When Henry looked over, Jonathan was smiling too, without the hint of anything other than amusement in his eyes.

"Ready to go?" Henry asked, crossing the distance between the two of them.

"After you." Jonathan gestured towards the open window.

"What? Need me to break your fall?" Henry replied, sticking one leg out and ducking through it despite his words.

"I just want you to get caught by the neighbors first."

The moment Henry sat down in Jonathan's Ford LTD, he realized that he'd been completely right; his Cutlass could run circles around this thing.

Not that it was a bad car, it was just old and didn't have someone like Henry looking after it (he didn't see that as bragging, just the truth). Actually, now that he was really paying attention and listening to it, this thing wasn't beyond the point of no return. Just some tune ups here and there, maybe some replaced parts, you wouldn't even be able to tell how much it'd been through. He could have this old girl back to its former glory in no time.

And yeah, Henry knew that he was fixating on the car to keep himself from breaking down over the events of the past twenty-four hours, but frankly he didn't care. If focusing on the sounds of what was undoubtedly the brake pad indicator rubbing against the rotor was what he had to do to keep himself from bursting into tears, then damn it, he'd listen.

What he hadn't considered though, was how that blocked out the rest of the world. When his head was in the clouds—or more accurately, under a hood—he didn't quite pay attention to his surroundings. So, he didn't notice the strange tension that was slowly filling the car as he and Jonathan silently made their way down the road.

At least, he didn't notice until it snapped.

"I wasn't asleep."

"What?" Henry asked, truly confused as he looked over at Jonathan. He'd only kind of heard that, and it was already a pretty vague thing to say. But, clearly it held some weight, going off of Jonathan's serious expression and nervous body language. What—?

"Last night. When you— *talked* to Nancy. I wasn't asleep."

*Oh, shit.*

Last night, he'd just taken Nancy's word, assumed that everything said was private. That was stupid. A mistake he never used to make. But, he'd just been so overwhelmed and it had been tumbling out of him before he could *really* think about it. He hadn't spared a moment to consider that Jonathan might hear it too.

"I—I thought you were going to tell her you liked her or something, I don't know. By the time I realized what was actually happening it was too late and—" Jonathan huffed softly, sounding frustrated, but not with Henry, "Sorry. I'm sorry. I know you didn't want me to know."

It was quiet for a moment, and Henry kept his eyes on the stray thread he kept picking at on his jacket. He really wasn't sure what to say. *"I forgive you"* forgive him for what? Wasn't his fault that he'd overheard what two other people in the same bed as him had said. *"I'm sorry"* what the hell was *he* sorry for? He didn't do anything wrong. *"Yeah, I'm one of those scary homosexuals they talk about on the news and, yeah, I shared a bed with you, but don't worry I promise I'm not interested. Please don't tell anyone else this very sensitive information, I don't want to get beat up,"* felt like the closest to the right thing, but just thinking about saying it made his throat burn. Those words felt like a betrayal, he just wasn't sure to who.

"Hey." Jonathan's voice pulled Henry out of his thoughts, and he looked over to see the oddly soft look he was sending him, "I'm not— It's okay. Really. It's okay. I'm not going to tell anyone."

It was quiet again, but Henry didn't feel the need to look away this time. Instead, he met Jonathan's eyes when he glanced away from the road and saw that there was no lie in them. He meant it, completely and genuinely. Without really thinking about it, Henry smiled a little. Jonathan returned it, and it felt like enough.

"I can't believe I doubled the amount of people who know last night," Henry said, mostly joking but unable to keep his real feelings out of it. Jonathan's expression turned into something closer to a frown, but not negatively so. He was just considering it.



"Who else knows?" He asked, before it seemed to dawn on him that might not be an appropriate question, "You don't have to answer that if you don't want to."

"It's fine," Henry said, with a shrug, "Barb, for one. And my brother, Lucas."

"How did you know it was okay to tell them?" Jonathan asked, sounding just the tiniest bit more invested than Henry would've expected, "How did you know they'd be okay with it?"

"Well, I didn't with Lucas," he admitted before he considered the question. He could tell Jonathan actually wanted to know—that he wasn't just making conversation—so he really thought about it. He wanted to be truthful, he wanted to say it *right*, if only because he might not get another chance.

"I just... I was really young. Like, 12—" he didn't miss the way Jonathan's breath came in the tiniest bit sharper, but he didn't really think about it, "—and I'd realized it a couple of months earlier. I was still trying to figure out how to live knowing that I... I suddenly felt like I *had* to tell someone, and Lucas and I were always pretty close, plus he couldn't really kick me out or anything. So, I just... I took a chance. I felt like I had to. Looking back on it, I can't believe I told my eight year old little brother such a huge secret, but... It worked out."

It was quiet for a moment. Henry hadn't thought about it in a while, but he really was lucky. It had been hard at first. Lucas hadn't really known what it meant, and Henry nearly couldn't admit it to himself, so explaining it to someone else was damn near impossible. But, even when Lucas didn't understand, he'd kept his promise. He never told anybody. It had been four years and he still hadn't.

"What about Barb?" Jonathan interrupted his train of thought, But Henry didn't mind. He'd been getting soppy dangerously close to a lot of unpleasant memories. What he did mind though, was the question.

"Barb... I... She..."

Henry sighed, and returned to that thread. There was no way he

could say this, no way he could keep his promise to Barb while still being truthful to Jonathan.

"She is too, isn't she?"

Henry's head snapped up without thinking and he realized too late that there was no way he could play that reaction off. It had been too sudden. His expression was too open and his eyes were too wide to hide the truth. He desperately tried to remember every conversation he'd ever had with Jonathan about Barb, tried to figure out what he'd said to give it away. When he'd blown it.

"That night, in the woods at Steve's," Jonathan said, answering Henry's unspoken question, "I saw her sitting on the diving board, and she looked... When I took her picture, I could tell that she was saying something, something important, but I couldn't tell what. I didn't realize until you said that she knew. Then it all sort of... made sense."

"I promised her I'd never tell anybody," Henry said, his voice small and tight.

"And you didn't," Jonathan reassured him, but he didn't relax. Things were still too much in the air, there was still too much that could go wrong.

"You can't tell Nancy."

"Promise," Jonathan replied, looking over with that same sincerity as before. He meant it.

Henry let out a shaky sigh of relief. It was one thing for his carelessness to result in people knowing about *him*, but Barb... He couldn't be the reason anyone—*Nancy*—knew that she was a lesbian. The guilt might actually kill him.

It was quiet again, but this time it felt like it was for Henry's benefit more than anything else. Like Jonathan was giving him a moment to bring it all back under control. Henry took a few calming breaths, and he felt his pulse slowly return to normal.

The exhaust sounded loose, Jonathan really should fix that.

"If..." Jonathan's hesitant voice brought Henry back to the present, and he looked over to see how his fingers were worrying the leather on the wheel, "You said you didn't know if Lucas would be okay with it. What if he wanted you to know he would be?"

A beat of silence.

"*What?*" Henry asked, unable to comprehend what the hell he'd meant by that. Jonathan sighed, exasperated with himself, before he tried again.

"Just... What could someone do that would let you know it was safe to tell them?"

"Um..." Henry said with a frown, understanding the question better than before but still feeling rather lost. He looked over at Jonathan with a speculative expression, unable to stop himself, but he didn't ask and Jonathan didn't offer anything. So, he turned his mind back to trying to figure out an answer, "Well, I guess I would feel better if I knew they, you know, didn't *hate* gay people. Like, talking about Elton John liking men and not being weird about it."

Jonathan hummed and Henry looked over to see a surprisingly serious expression on his face. Like he was really absorbing this information, like it was important.

It suddenly occurred to Henry that maybe it *was*.

"But, I wouldn't do that too much," he said hurriedly, feeling like what he was saying wasn't good enough, "I wouldn't constantly be talking about how great gay people are. It would feel—*pointed*. It would make—make *me* feel like they were trying to push me to tell them. I would... I would probably freak out a little."

"Okay," Jonathan murmured, thinking it over, "Makes sense."

"But, I might still not tell you," Henry warned, trying desperately to communicate what he'd experienced in four years' worth of hiding his sexuality, "I didn't tell Lucas because he was a perfect brother, I didn't tell Nancy because she was my best friend. I told them because I felt like I would lose my mind if I didn't. And if... If *I hadn't* felt that way,

I wouldn't have told them. Even if I did have the perfect brother who I knew would accept me, I don't know if I'd tell him. It's got nothing to do with him, it's just about me. And he can't change that, can't force it out of me, no matter how nice he is about it."

Jonathan looked over at him with a funny expression and it occurred to him that maybe that last bit had been a tad obvious, but Henry couldn't bring himself to care. Jonathan had asked, and he'd be damned if he didn't give him the best advice he could.

A moment passed, and neither of them said a thing. Neither needed to. No point in saying what they both already knew.

"We've been sitting in your driveway for five minutes."

Henry looked up to see that yes, at some point they had parked next to his house. He'd been so wrapped up in his thoughts and the conversation that he hadn't noticed.

Henry felt his mouth run dry as he took in the seemingly normal front door. Actually, it *was* normal. It was just the fact that he *wasn't* that was making him nervous.

"Everything okay?" Jonathan asked, Henry heaving a heavy sigh in response.

"To be perfectly honest I'd rather double the amount people who know again than talk to my mom right now."

"Where have you been?"

Henry raised an eyebrow at his brother's tone as he hung his jacket up on the hook. While he'd expected to be accosted the moment he opened the door, he hadn't exactly expected it to be by Lucas.

"Well, geez, Dad. Did I miss your curfew?" He asked, maybe a little sharper than he would've liked. It had been a long couple of days and it was getting harder and harder to stay pleasant. Out of the corner of his eye, Lucas frowned.

"Mom was freaking out all night."

Henry stopped in his tracks as the weight on his shoulders suddenly became nearly unbearable. He knew that would be the case, he knew ditching out overnight would get that reaction from his parents, but it still ached to hear it confirmed.

"Is she home right now?" He finally asked, his tone a little more muted than before.

"No," Lucas replied, a hint of disbelief on his features when Henry sighed in relief, "Erica had a doctor's appointment."

"Well, then I'll be sure to leave before she gets back," Henry said without really thinking about it, hopping up the steps without paying attention to the way Lucas's jaw dropped in response.

"You're just going to leave?" He demanded, following Henry up the stairs, "Without telling her you're okay?"

"Do me a solid and tell her I was here?" Henry asked, rounding the corner into his room with his brother hot on his heels.

"No!" Lucas exploded in response, loud enough that Henry turned around, just in time to catch the horrible cocktail of anger and sadness on his brother's face, "No! I'm not going to cover for you after you take dad's gun and disappear all night!"

"Lucas..." Henry said, sighing heavily and feeling so, so tired.

"You can't do that," Lucas persisted, shaking his head harshly, "You can't, not after Mike and Dustin... You *can't*."

Henry looked up to see a stricken look on Lucas's face and realized that the way his brother was acting wasn't just about him being gone. He'd missed something.

"Lucas..." He said again, his tone much gentler than before, "What happened?"

Lucas shook his head again, and guilt wormed its way up Henry's throat. He should've considered that maybe his mother wasn't the only one who had freaked out all night. Clearly, something had happened while he was gone, something with Mike and Dustin. The

boys had falling outs from time to time, and Lucas was always upset about it for a day before they all got over it. Usually, Henry just had to pat him on the shoulder and remind him that they were his friends and they loved him, no matter how dick-ish they were acting. But right now, after everything that had happened with Will... That wasn't good enough, Henry knew it.

But, with that acknowledged, he didn't know what to say. He couldn't seem to find the words that he knew his brother needed to hear right now. What usually came so naturally felt impossible.

Henry rubbed his face, painfully aware of the way Lucas watched him, as he searched for something to say. Something that might smooth this all over. Make it all better.

There wasn't anything.

"Are you and Jonathan Byers dating?"

"What?!"

Henry's head snapped up and Lucas looked at him with an expression that was *deadly serious*.

This wasn't a joke.

He—They—Jonathan—*What?!*

"What on *Earth* would make you think that?" He demanded, and Lucas looked a little affronted. Like he'd insulted his intelligence by asking that.

"Jonathan's never had any friends before, but now you two are acting all *friendly*," Lucas said in a tone that Henry never wanted to hear his little brother use, "You walked away to sit alone together at the funeral, then you disappeared all night, *and then* you guys sat in the driveway for like *half an hour* before you came in."

Henry blinked.

Again, he couldn't think of a single thing to say, because...

Oh, *god*.

That made sense.

"You could tell Mom that you slept over at his house to help with his grief or something," Lucas offered as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully, clearly just taking Henry's stunned expression as a confirmation, "She might be less mad if she thought you were helping someone. I mean, she's still going to *kill* you, but maybe not as bad."

"I... That's... That's actually a pretty good idea, thank you," Henry said, Lucas smiling at the praise and nodding his head to say *you're welcome*, "But, I'm—I'm not *dating* Jonathan Byers."

"Then why have you been hanging out with him so much?" Lucas asked, raising an eyebrow, "Why'd he drive you home after you were gone all night?"

Henry opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Instead, he was hit with a sudden, terrible realization.

Oh, good *god*.

Him dating Jonathan Byers made so much more fucking sense than the truth.

Lucas nodded sagely, as if he'd expected as much.

"People always said stuff like that about Jonathan, but I didn't pay attention to it because..." He shrugged, before his nose scrunched up, "But, I feel like you could do better."

"I..." Henry started, feeling completely and utterly lost in this conversation, in this *life*, "Need... to... change. I need to change."

He put his hands on Lucas's shoulders to usher him out of the room, trying to ignore how his brother continued to prattle on about his relationship with Jonathan.

"I mean, he's nice, but he's weird. He reads, like, *Breakfast of Champions* for *fun*." Lucas spun around once he was standing on the other side of the doorway, "Plus, he only listens to music they don't

play on the radio. And, I mean, The Talking Heads are fine or whatever, but I don't think he likes Prince and Madonna like you do."

Henry felt no guilt slamming the door in his little brother's face.

*"Also, he once said that people who'd rather go to parties than stay at home with a good book are shallow and probably secretly unhappy!"* Lucas called, his voice muffled through the door, *"I just thought you should know that!"*

Henry leaned his head on the door, feeling more exhausted than ever before, and didn't move until he heard Lucas's footsteps retreating down the stairs.

Instead of dwelling on—on *all that*, he chose to walk over to his closet and begin to pull some stuff out. He passed by his favorite shirts—wouldn't want to get them ruined—or anything that was made of lighter material. Finally he settled on a flannel that his dad had insisted he get because *"you need to own one, Henry,"* and a pair of jeans. Once he'd gotten all that on and had laced up his boots, he grabbed one of his heavier jackets out of the closet; not because it was particular cold, but because he supposed that it would be better to be wearing something thicker when... when...

What was he doing?

Henry sat down heavily on his bed as everything hit him all at once.

In the midst of waking up in an unfamiliar room and having to deal with two new people knowing the truth about him, somehow thoughts of what exactly went down last night had gotten muddled and lost. But now? Now that he was sitting alone in his bedroom with nothing to distract him?

This was *insane*.

Monster hunting, that's what he was doing. He was going honest-to-god *monster hunting*. And he hadn't even really questioned it! Just went along with Nancy and Jonathan, hadn't really spared a thought to how he was putting himself in the line of fire of that *thing*.

It could tear him apart, no doubt in his mind. He'd be just like that



deer. And for what? To help Nancy and Jonathan? He barely knew them! They hadn't exchanged more than a few sentences before a few days ago! To get rid of that creature? That wasn't his responsibility! There was no reason that *he* had to be the one to deal with it! To bring Will and Barb back? He'd been to that place, saw what it was like, and let's face it, they were already *dead*!

oh.

Oh.

Henry fell backwards on his bed and looked up at the ceiling as he considered it. He hadn't admitted it before, not even to himself, but... If Will and Barb had been caught by that creature, then they'd probably been dead near instantly. And even if they somehow got to that place without immediately getting torn apart by that thing... he'd only been there briefly, but... Nothing could survive there, not for long.

They were dead. They had to be. There was no point to this stupid plan he'd concocted with Nancy and Jonathan. They were just going to get killed too. Barb and Will were dead!

*Do you actually believe that, or do you just want it to be true?*

He wasn't sure where that came from, what deep recess of his mind pulled that out, but it caused an immediate visceral reaction. Disgust and guilt and whole plethora of other negative emotions welled up inside him, and his expression twisted into an affronted scowl. Why would he *want* his best friend and a sweet kid to be dead?

*The same reason you were glad Jonathan took pictures of Nancy from the woods.*

Oh.

oh.

The front door opened.

It was distant enough that he might not have caught it on a normal day. But, today wasn't normal; he was lying on his bed surrounded by

devastating silence. Well, *that* part wasn't out of the ordinary. Him noticing it was.

He moved without really thinking about it, and he made his way out of his room and down the stairs as the realization of exactly what type of person he was continued to crush him.

His mom was in the kitchen, putting away a bag of groceries while Erica sucked on a lollypop at the table. Mrs. Sinclair didn't see him when he rounded into the room, but Erica did; his little sister's eyes widening comically as he came into view.

"I'm gonna go sit outside," She said, already slipping out of her chair and heading towards the door.

"Okay, Honey," Judith replied, sounding distracted and not even looking back at her daughter. Henry knew this mood, this slightly frenzied preoccupation with menial tasks. It's what happened to his mom when she was worried. Like, if she couldn't control a situation, she could damn well control the contents of her fridge and the state of her linens.

Guilt gripped his throat like a vice, but Henry swallowed hard and forced past it.

"Mom?"

Judith whipped around, and Henry had no idea if she was surprised because of the sudden voice or because of who it belonged to. For a moment, she just looked at her son as if she was seeing a ghost. Henry didn't see that, though. He was too busy staring at her shoes, his shoulders hunched, searching for something to say. Everything felt... *inadequate*.

Then, all at once, the silence ended and she rushed forward to pull Henry into a tight hug. He sunk into it, not realizing how badly he'd needed this after—after *everything* until just now. Without even knowing, he'd spent the last twelve hours desperate for his mother to hug him and tell him everything was going to be okay.

But, he was only going to get one of those things and he knew it.

"Where have you *been*?" Judith demanded, pulling back with her hands on her son's shoulders to try to catch his eyes with her desperate gaze, "You were gone all night! Your father and I were worried sick!"

"I, um..." Henry started, trying to remember the lie that Lucas had concocted on his behalf, but finding nothing. Instead, he just put his hands over his mom's, desperate for any little comfort.

When had this happened?

When had he stopped being able to talk to his family? When had he stopped being able to tell them what they needed to hear? When had he stopped being able to do the one thing he was any good at?

"Henry," Judith said, her stern voice cutting through his thoughts like a knife, "Where were you last night?"

Henry didn't answer, and never once looked up from the floor.

He'd never done anything like this before, and even when he did do something that upset his parents, he always owned up to it. Nodded his head, apologized, and took the punishment. It was one of the things he knew made his parents think of him as "*such a good young man*." He liked that, he liked that he made his parents happy; they were the ones who were there for him, so he did everything he could to make it easier on them.

God, he wished he could do that right now. He wished he could make his mama happy and then get the support he was so desperate for.

But, he couldn't.

Maybe that's why his mother's expression turned stony. Because this wasn't like him, because she wasn't seeing her son right now. Or, at least, she wasn't seeing the son she *knew*.

"This is *not* okay," Judith said, taking a step back and leaving Henry feeling terribly alone, even though he was just standing in the middle of his kitchen, "This is *completely* unacceptable."

She was right. He knew it. He also knew he was making that much

worse by not giving his mom an answer and refusing to look her in the eye.

He wanted to say something, anything, to make this stop. He wanted bridge the gap between them. He wanted to get another hug and tell her how *scared* he was. How he was facing something so much bigger than him. How he was terrified of what was going to happen.

How he *couldn't do this*.

And how he was *horrified* of what that said about him.

But, instead of saying any of those things, or even some lie that would make this situation just a little bit better, he just... He said nothing. He just kept looking at the floor and said *nothing*.

"You cannot just disappear all night," Judith continued, "*Epecially* after what happened to the Byers boy."

Ironic that she'd bring that up, since the truth was that he'd spent all night in the woods with Jonathan Byers *looking* for Will Byers. Well, looking for that thing that took him, but same difference.

"We were at that poor boy's *funeral* and you just thought it would be perfectly fine to leave and not tell any of us where you were going?!"

Huh, he had done that, hadn't he? Spent all night in the woods, that was. Stole his dad's gun and went looking for some creature without a face. Then he followed right after Nancy through the tree and into that other place. He'd barely even thought about it.

Weird.

"One of Lucas's best friend's is *dead*, Henry, do you understand that? Do you understand that Lucas is experiencing *grief* right now?"

Weird because when Steve had confronted Jonathan, he'd been so *relieved* to find out it was for a good reason. Because, he didn't have to really deal with how he was too much of a coward to stand up for Jonathan. He'd been absolved from doing the right thing.

"The last thing he needs is his big brother walking out the door with

barely a goodbye and vanishing on him. Do you understand how not okay that is?"

Ever since he was a kid, he'd thought of himself as a coward. Constantly terrified that someone would find out the truth about him. Turning to nicotine to keep from tearing himself apart because of the fear. Keeping everyone at an arm's length, afraid that if they got any closer they'd see through the façade.

Always feeling like he was right there on the edge of the Quarry again.

So scared of living life as the person he was.

"He was *upset*, Henry. He came home from the Wheelers upset and you weren't here to help him. You weren't here *all night*."

But... a coward doesn't go into the woods at night looking for a monster. A coward doesn't follow a girl he barely knows—*no, no, stop it, tell the truth*. A coward doesn't follow his *friend* into a monster's den. A coward... A coward doesn't admit the truth about himself.

"He doesn't talk to me or your father like he does to you, you know that."

Maybe he wasn't a coward.

"He *needed* you, Henry."

Or, at least, he wasn't one when it counted.

"I hope whatever you were doing was worth it. Worth abandoning your brother, and worrying your parents, and being grounded for at *least* a month."

And it counted right now.

"Barb's missing."

His mom cut off in the middle of her tirade, and the anger she'd been exhibiting for the past few minutes was gone just like that. Maybe she hadn't expected him to say anything, just take whatever she said

and accept it, but she certainly hadn't expected him to say *that*.

"What?" She asked.

For the first time since the beginning of this conversation, Henry raised his gaze from the floor and looked his mother in the eye.

"Barb's missing."

It was quiet for a moment as Judith's eyes scanned her son's face, looking for any tell that this was just some sick joke. He wished that there was. He wished he could give her that. But, he couldn't. He couldn't be what his mom wanted right now. He couldn't even be what she needed.

He had to be himself.

"I'm sorry," Henry finally said, utterly genuine, "I... I didn't mean to disappear on you. It just happened. A lot happened last night. I was—I *am* trying to find her. But, that doesn't excuse what I put you, and Dad, and Lucas, and Erica through. I'm sorry. Really. I mean it."

Judith nodded wordlessly, clearly still processing this new information, and her eyes lowered as she ruminated on it; factored it into everything she already knew to be true, and likely mentally lessened the punishment she was going to level on him. But, that didn't matter. She wouldn't after what he said next.

Henry took a deep breath, because that had been hard to say. That was... That wasn't something a coward would do. But now...

Now it was time to be brave.

"But, I'm not staying."

Judith looked up sharply with wide eyes, and Henry couldn't blame her. He could hardly believe he'd said it either.

"What did you just say?" Her voice was low, cautionary. The kind of tone that sent him and his siblings into hurried apologies. And, god, a part of him wanted to do that. Wanted to mutter that he was sorry and run right back up the stairs to wait it out in his room. Forget

about Barb and Will, forget about the monster and that place, forget about...

The sound of tires on pavement pulled his attention to the window over the sink, and he watched as his car pulled into the driveway. Through the windshield, he could see Jonathan and Nancy, side-by-side, and he realized something that he should've the moment he became friends with Barb.

It was easier to be brave when you weren't alone.

His jaw set and he felt his shoulders go back before he looked down at his mother. It was easy to forget when all he ever did was slouch over desks and lean against walls, but Henry was 6'2.

In that moment, he looked every inch.

"I'm not staying," Henry repeated, his voice even and strong but not harsh, "You can ground me for the rest of my life if you like, I'll deserve it, but I'm leaving. And I'm not coming back until this is finished."

Henry didn't shy away from eye contact, just looked at his mom with nothing but determination written on his features. He was unwavering. There was nothing she could say, nothing she could do, that would make him stay. He was going to finish this, one way or another.

And, while everything about Judith broadcasted how shocked she was in this moment, there was something else. Something in her eyes. Something that she herself probably didn't even realize was there.

Something like *pride*.

"I've got to go," Henry said, walking without hesitation towards the door.

"Henry..." Judith said weakly, like she was at a total loss of what to say. He didn't blame her, he wasn't entirely sure where this was coming from either.

"I'll try to call," he said, offering what he could. As he headed towards

the door, he passed the living room, where (previously unbeknownst to him) three pre-teens stood.

Mike and Dustin both had eyes as wide as dinner plates, but neither looked more shocked than Lucas. Of course, he knew just how out of the ordinary this was. Sure, the other boys were aware that Henry wasn't the type to talk that way to his parents—hell, they'd teased him about being a "Mama's boy" when they'd stayed for dinner and Judith had dropped a kiss on his head. But, no one else on the *planet* knew exactly *how* radical this was more than Lucas.

Henry wasn't even embarrassed.

Instead, he looked at their shocked expressions and spoke with an authority he didn't know he had.

"Stay out of the woods."

The three boys nodded (Henry might've even heard a muttered *yes, sir* from Dustin), and who knows if they'd actually listen to him or not. But, Henry didn't care. Because even though he was heading out into an uncertain future, even though everything he knew to be true about the universe had been completely flipped last night, and even though he was Black *and* gay in a world that hated both, he wasn't scared.

Because he was heading out to a car where his two friends were waiting for him; because now that he knew what the problem was, he could fix it; because he was *Henry Sinclair*.

And for the first time in his life, he felt like Will had been *right* to call him the Indestructible Teen.